

In the face of your light

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Relationship:	Male Lavellan/Solas , Male Inquisitor/Solas (Dragon Age) , Minor or Background Relationship(s) , Inquisitor/Solas (Dragon Age) , Lavellan/Solas (Dragon Age) , Fen'Harel/Male Lavellan (Dragon Age)
Character:	Solas (Dragon Age) , Male Lavellan (Dragon Age) , Male Inquisitor (Dragon Age) , Dragon Age: Inquisition Inner Circle , Original Elvhen Character(s) , Fen'Harel (Dragon Age)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Time Travel , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Past Character Death , Angst , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Slow Burn , Time Travel Fix-It , Or Is It? , Elven Mysteries Afoot , Lavellan is exhausted(TM) , Dalish Elven Culture and Customs , Mind the Rating , secrets and spirits and lies oh my! , lavellan loves his friends very much , his friends want him to sleep , i didn't mean to write an epic but here we are , Everything is Beautiful and Everything Hurts , things aren't what they seem , Memory Loss , solas and lavellan have the emotional iq of dry bowls of pasta , watch as da4 nukes the lore building i've done , hopepunk vibes , you'll have to rip my love for celestial imagery from my cold dead hands , large divergences after IYHSB , some of you call me a demon author and i'm glad we're all on the same page , solas sometimes talks in hallelujah cadence or in iambic meter because i'm a nerd , Eventual Smut , but i've provided a skip button so you can opt out if you'd like , author kisses canon on the mouth then dumps it in a dank cave in crestwood , it's about finding light in dark places your honour , and choosing to be the light if there's none , my tags are a mess im sorry
Series:	Part 1 of lover. your back is bruised from what you carry
Collections:	Greats fics currently ongoing , Favorite Self-Insert and OC-Centric Fanfics , Hainako's Collection of amazing fanfiction , The best of self inserts and Oc stories , aadarshinah's list of fics to die for , The Best Fics I Have Had The Pleasure of Reading
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In the face of your light

by [noverture](#)

Summary

"Here lay the world in tatters and ruins, littered with the remains of once mighty armies and terrible cities. Brought to its knees by the Dread Wolf. The Dread Wolf who was all pride and no wisdom, all guilt and no atonement."

Inquisitor Lavellan saved the world, lost the world, then saved it again - loved and lost, loved and lost. Cruel joke upon cruel joke piled atop each other under the disguise of destiny and fate, until the curtains fell on him and Solas with their blades piercing the other's heart. It was a disgustingly poetic end.

And because his luck was rotten, he wakes at the moment before it all began.

A second chance or a second doom? Lavellan wasn't sure which he preferred.

"Uncover the past, little raven, the Wolf is not the liar here. Those who walk the shadows never leave."

[Complete]

- Inspired by [the forest is dark and deep and i've seen you here before](#) by [victoriousscarf](#)

Fools that we are

Chapter Notes

Hover (or press and hold if on mobile) over the Elvish for translation. If it's not working, check if Creator's Style is turned off. If it's still not working, you can click on the numbers to take you to the translation at the bottom. You'll see what I mean :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

we danced upon the world's edge—

They said defeat tasted bitter and acidic, but all Lavellan could taste was metal.

Here lay the world in ruins, littered with the remains of once mighty armies and terrible cities. Brought to its knees by the Dread Wolf. The Dread Wolf who was all pride and no wisdom, all guilt and no atonement.

Not that it mattered. It was too late now and they both knew, both understood, that they would leave the world broken and that they wouldn't be there to see it fall and rebuild.

There was only one way to end this.

Lavellan drove his dagger into the Dread Wolf's heart. The Wolf stabbed his heart in return.

His body seized at the intrusion and he choked on his next breath. He looked into the Wolf's eyes, searched for his lover in the depths of all that sorrow and sacrifice.

He couldn't find him.

Lavellan laughed, broken and dry. He summoned the last of his breath to ask, "Is this your victory?"

The Wolf smiled sadly. "As much as it is yours."

Lavellan pushed the blade in further and the Wolf accepted it without a fight.

"Farewell, Fen'Harel."

They fell, lost in a world that would mourn neither.

Beyond the layer of smoke that had smothered the skies, the sun rose, stubbornly needling its light through that haze. A blade of light slashed across Lavellan's eye, but he couldn't feel its warmth.

It was time to rest.

Lavellan closed his eyes.

The Well of Sorrows whispered in the back of his fading mind, their lamenting voices crooning a

lullaby—

[*Ma garas mir renan, ara ma'athlan vhenas.*](#)^[1]

Lavellan's eyes snapped open to a dark sky dusted with stars.

Cold tears had tracked down his temples and into his hair, and the air filling his spasming lungs was fresh, crisp, sharp in a way that could only belong to a forest at night. Not the stench of death and decay. Not the fetid rot of a battlefield.

He shot up in alarm, the fur blankets covering him falling on his lap, brushing against his hands—

Blankets? Hands?

His breath caught. That couldn't be... He flexed his left hand beneath the blanket, the soft fur brushing against his fingers and palm.

Slowly, he pulled his hand out.

Indeed, there it was. Left hand, left arm, the works, the whole limb intact without green racing through his nerves and forcing them to sing in pain. Flesh and bone. Not the metal and lyrium of his prosthetic. His armour was gone too, replaced with a simple sleeping tunic.

And around him, the sleeping members of Clan Lavellan lay spread out across the forest clearing, warm in their blankets and dreaming beneath the stars, his sister wrapped in her own furs beside him, white hair spilling over her pillow. Their aravels rested in the near distance, purple and blue sails fluttering with every gentle breath of wind.

What was this? What sick joke was this? This couldn't be, they were all...

His hands shook as he held the letter stained with his tears.

'I regret to inform you that there are no surviving members of Clan Lavellan.'

They should be dead. *He* should be dead. Unless... Was this an afterlife? Had he finally come to join them?

Lavellan relaxed. That was it, wasn't it? He was home.

The Ancient voices surged like a tidal wave in the back of his mind, flooding his awareness with their chorus. As loud as a thunderclap, they all said:

[*Din.*](#)^[2]

Lavellan stilled. A chill settled around his heart, swelled up his throat.

No? What the fuck did it mean *no*?

His gaze fell on the pack resting beside his bedroll, a wooden carving of a halla dangling from the strap. Wasn't that... He'd finished carving that the night before the—

The Conclave.

He frantically grabbed the pack and threw the flap open, found it filled with supplies. Ready for departure.

No, no. What was this? What the hell was this?

His panic grew, threatened to escape as a sob. Lavellan scrambled out of his bedroll and fled, barely managing to not step on anyone, his heart squeezing tighter as he passed familiar faces that he never thought he'd see again.

He fled into the forest and leaned against a tree, buried his face in his hands.

“What did you do?” he demanded at the Well. “What did you *do*?”

Their whispers rolled like a dark fog.

“[*Dirtha em*^{\[3\]}!](#)” he ordered.

[*Tharia my enal'sal*^{\[4\]}](#), answered the Well.

He pulled at his hair, a manic sob tearing through his throat at the confirmation.

“Is this your doing?” he hissed at the Well, but there was no response this time.

Lavellan covered his face and yelled into his hands.

Why? Why was he here again? He'd been ready to die! What fucked up god or unseen force decided they weren't done playing with him yet?

He shook as he screamed out a litany of curses. Bullshit. This was all bullshit. All of his sacrifices, all of his pain, had they all been for nothing? Everything he'd lost, *everyone* he'd lost—

Now he'd lost again. Lost his victory, his choice to die, his rest.

Was losing the only thing left for him?

He gnashed his teeth.

No. Fuck that.

Fine. Something wanted to yank him around? Play him like an idiot? He wasn't going to let that happen. He was going to march up to that gods-forsaken Conclave, he was going to do it all over again, he was going to make sure he wouldn't be made a fool of again. Not by Corypheus, not by Solas, not by whatever higher power had plucked him away from that hellish battlefield.

He wiped his tears, forced himself to think.

If he really had been sent back in time to six years ago, he needed to determine how and why and what the implications would be. So far, it seemed his injuries had been healed, but he was still in his older body sans the lost arm. Good. His body was still built for war. So then, what now? Try to prevent Divine Justinia's death or the explosion? But how would that affect the—

“Mahanon?”

His racing mind blanked at the voice, all his strategies and plans slipping from his grasp and shattering.

Homesickness seared in his chest.

“You left in such a hurry and woke me up. I thought you just really needed to piss, but then you didn’t come back for a while, so I got worried.”

His body tensed in preparation for battle, but that was ridiculous. There were no enemies, no fights to be had.

No, that wasn’t quite right. This was a fight of another manner; one he was ill-equipped for.

He drew in a shuddering breath, gathered all the courage he could spare, and slowly faced his sister.

There she was, looking like the preserved yet fading image that he’d held in his mind. All of his anger left. He trembled.

Ellana stopped when she saw him, squinted. “Did you... cut your hair?”

She crossed the distance between them to take a closer look. Lavellan stepped back, stomach churning, felt unsteady despite the solid ground beneath him, but she didn’t stop advancing until she was in front of him.

He couldn’t breathe.

Ellana stared at him, amber eyes painfully familiar. While they shared their mother's white hair and brown skin, Ellana had inherited their mother's eyes. He used to wish he'd shared their eye colour, had hated the gold of his when he was younger. He'd thought them too bright. Too strange. But Ellana had constantly given him flower crowns and bracelets woven with yellow flowers because they'd reminded her of his eyes, and he'd felt better about them.

Well, the flowers had almost always been crumpled, but it was the thought that had counted.

Gods, he missed her. Unbearably so.

“Creators, you look like shit,” she said, brows raising. “Are you alright?”

Lavellan reached for her hesitantly, gripped her shoulder to confirm that she really was here.

“Okay, you’re really starting to worry me. What’s—”

He pulled her into a tight hug. She was here, warm and alive and breathing and *real*. Not a ghost that would fade when he reached for her, not an apparition that would whisper condemnations for failing to save his family. He memorised all he could. Memorised how her hair felt under his hand, rough and tangled due to her lack of care. Memorised the smell of pages and herbs and campfire smoke clinging to her clothes.

Ellana wrapped her arms around him. “Hey,” she said, voice softening. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I...”

I failed you, killed you. I died. I’m back. I’m drowning.

“I had a bad dream,” he said, the lie sounding flimsy.

She placed her hand on the back of his head. “It was just a bad dream. Are you that worried about the Conclave? Maybe you shouldn’t set sail tomorrow after all.”

It was undeniable now. It really was the night before he'd left.

She pulled away, Mythal's vallaslin shifting as she frowned. "It looks like you didn't get any sleep either. Do you want to tell me about your bad dream?"

He couldn't answer, still staring at her, a flood of emotions he couldn't name filling his chest and pressing against the confines of his ribs. Lavellan opened his mouth to attempt an answer, but a gutted exhale left instead of words. He closed his mouth and turned away, trying to hold himself together.

But he couldn't.

A wave of exhaustion battered at his carefully constructed defences and a sob attempted to escape again. His shoulders shook from the strain of holding it in.

"Hanon?" Ellana's expression morphed into worry once more and she cradled his face.

The warmth and solidness of her touch broke the last of his defences. His sob finally escaped. A soft, pitiful sound. All the pain he'd brushed aside surged and fell from his eyes, stung his lips with salt.

"Lana," he said through his tears, a plea and a cry of relief all at once. "I'm sorry, Lana. I'm so sorry."

He slumped against her, wept on her shoulder.

"I'm so tired," he managed to say despite the thickness of his throat. "I just want to go home."

She hurriedly gathered him in her arms and he clung to her like a babe.

"It's alright," she soothed. "Look, we'll talk to the Keeper, alright? I'll go to the Conclave instead. I was supposed to go anyway."

Lavellan shook his head violently, trembling under the weight of his memories. He should be dead. He should be dead and Solas should be dead.

But Ellana? Ellana was here, was warm, was living. If she went, she would be the dead one.

His violent sobs wracked his entire body and his knees gave. Ellana staggered and eased them down onto the ground, her arms trembling from the strain of holding him up.

"Hanon? Talk to me, please. What's wrong?"

But he couldn't talk any more, helpless against the barrage of tears that he'd held back for so many years. Tears that he'd buried under anger and spite and blood.

He needed to pull himself together. She needed him to be strong. He couldn't be weak like this, he couldn't—

He couldn't be strong.

Lavellan hid his face into the crook of her shoulder and wept.

In between the sounds of his heaving cries, Ellana sang the beginnings of a familiar lullaby.

"Elgara vallas, da'len..."

The lullaby their mother used to sing to them every night. After her death, he and Ellana had sung it to each other instead in the wake of nightmares or sleepless nights.

He hadn't heard it in so long.

The notes curled in his ears, soothing.

"Dirthara lothlenan'as..."

His sobs gradually eased, his deathly grip on Ellana's robes loosening, his trembling shoulders and stuttering breaths steady.

Once his sobs quieted, she stopped.

"Hanon?" she asked softly. "Do you want me to get the Keeper?"

He shook his head, too wrung out for words.

"Okay." She pulled away and used the end of her sleeve to wipe his face gently. "Okay."

Once his tears were dry, she sat back on her legs, patiently waiting for him to regain his bearings. Lavellan wiped the last of his tears.

"Are we dead?" he asked, trying again.

"Fuck, I hope not. I've been working too hard these past few days. If it turns out I accidentally incinerated half of the Halla Keeper's hair and embarrassed myself for nothing, I'll carve a hole into the ground so I can rot there."

That brought a small smile to his lips. How he'd missed her and her unwavering will. Her sharp wit and intelligence. Perhaps Ellana would have made a better Inquisitor.

The thought of that curdled his stomach. It would be her who would have made the sacrifices, made the choices, shouldered the burdens and responsibilities and the blood on her hands. Her who would have gritted her teeth in dark rooms and screamed and wept behind closed doors.

His smile faded.

No. Better not.

"Do you still want to head out tomorrow?" she asked.

An alternate path revealed itself, a path of relative peace. No Herald, no Inquisitor, no Inquisition, no Solas, no heartache. Just him with his clan. Home at last.

"I don't want to," he admitted, succumbing to his weakness for a moment.

Lavellan wanted to stay here forever. If this had been a dream or an afterlife, he would have stayed.

But it wasn't.

If he stayed knowing that he could have done something but hadn't, he would never forgive himself. Besides, this was his unfinished business. He had to see this through.

"Alright," said Ellana, "I'll let Keeper Deshanna know. I'm sure I can come up with a reason—"

“No.” He steeled himself, hardened his resolve. “I said I’d rather not, not that I won’t. I’m sorry, Lana. I worried you unnecessarily.”

She frowned at him again, but he couldn’t bear to meet her gaze. It pinned him, heavy. But it wasn’t the kind of heavy that he’d felt from the eyes of the faithful or of the soldiers, their worship painting his skin and hardening like resin, displaying his pain for all to see. They’d placed his anguish on a pedestal because they’d wished for a perfect story, a perfect hero.

And a perfect hero was a suffering one.

“What’s really going on?” she asked. “This isn’t just about the Conclave, is it? And it’s not just your hair that’s changed, Hanon, it’s... all of you. You’re different. The way you talk, the way you... *move*.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to explain it.” Was the lost look on her face the same look that the others had seen in him during his fumbling leadership?

Lavellan considered lying again, considered brushing it all off as a nightmare. But he felt raw and wrecked and he’d been fighting in a war which, for him, had only been a scant few minutes ago, and Ellana was a fragment of home. Of comfort.

How would she take the truth? Would she see him as a madman?

Lavellan rubbed his face. His eyes felt swollen.

“I’m from the future,” he said. No point dancing around it. “Fen’Harel returned, wishing to restore what once was at the cost of the world. He took on the guise of a harmless apostate, a strange but learned elf who kept to himself and preferred to go barefoot and hated tea and only drank them when he was upset.” Recounting Solas sent a heavy hook reeling through his heart. “He took my heart, then my arm, then he burned the world.” He smiled grimly. “So I took his life, and he took mine.”

Her breath hitched.

“But something sent me back,” Lavellan continued. “I still don’t know what or how or why, but I know one thing: Fen’Harel is real and needs to be stopped. I have to go to the Conclave.”

She searched his eyes, almost beseeching. “You’re joking. Tell me you’re joking. It’s not a funny joke by any means but tell me you’re joking. We can laugh it off. I can make fun of your terrible sense of humour.”

He gave her a tired and brittle smile. “I wish it was a joke. It certainly feels like it, but just at my expense.”

“What the hell,” she whispered to herself, staring at the ground in a stupor.

Lavellan reached for her hands and held them. “I want to run so terribly badly. I want to stay here with you and ignore what’s bound to happen next. But I can’t.”

She shook her head again, shifted her hands so that they were holding his. “Let someone else do it! Why does it have to be you? Why do you have to— You *died*!” Her face fell. “Why are you just going through with this?”

“Because I know what’s going to happen. I know who Fen’Harel is, what his plans are. It has to be me. I can’t just...” He bowed his head. “I want to stay so terribly. And I’ve missed you and missed the clan and I want to stay, I really do. But I need to do this.”

Ellana looked down, expression strained. But as the First, she knew this feeling of responsibility, of obligation, more than anyone else.

Lavellan hugged her again. He wouldn't let his family die again. He would do everything in his power to keep them safe.

He would change the very fabric of the future if he had to.

"Let me come with you," said Ellana, pulling away.

"No. This Conclave will go poorly. You best stay here and leave it to me."

Ellana looked as if she wanted to argue further, but they both knew his mind was already made. She placed her hand over the back of his neck instead, fingers brushing against the ends of his hair, and pressed their foreheads together.

"Be careful," she said. "And when you see Fen'Harel, kick his backside."

He smiled. "I'll do my best. Whatever happens next, know that I'm proud to be a part of Clan Lavellan."

Lavellan left before the sun had even risen, couldn't bring himself to say goodbye to the rest of the clan. Besides, his appearance would be difficult to explain.

He left the halla head he'd carved with Ellana.

Aboard the ship, he greeted the dawn, the sun's golden glow veiling his face with a tentative warmth. Beneath him, the waters of the Waking Sea crested and swelled, darkness in its depths.

Chapter End Notes

The last thing that Solas hears isn't even his true name :) Ouch

Lavellan: im good, i feel great, im ready to throw hands with two gods and flip off the universe.

Ellana: hey u good?

Lavellan, already bawling: yea

Childish_Midget([@cdraconik](#)) drew [chapter art](#) for the previous version of chapter 1, but unfortunately I scrapped the scene that part was drawn for. Any following chapter sketches have been drawn by them!

The lullaby that the Well and Ellana sings is Mir Da'len Somniar, to the tune of [totalspiffage's cover](#) - it's so beautiful. I love it.

Translation

[1] **Ma garas mir renan, ara ma'athlan vhenas:** Follow my voice, I will call you home [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Din:** No [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Dirtha em!:** Tell me! [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Tharia my enal'sal:** The wheel has begun anew [\[1\]](#)

Twice around the twist of vine

relentless beat of time—

Travelling through Ferelden filled him with a choking ache. Patches of the land were still scarred from the Blight, but at least they weren't ash — still intact. Not torn apart by Solas' inane plans.

His mind raced as he rode to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Divine Justinia had been ambushed before the peace talks could even begin. Maybe if he reached her earlier, he could prevent her death, could prevent so many others from being killed in the blast. But what would the implications be for the Inquisition? The Mage-Templar war? If he interfered earlier, would he have to confront Corypheus?

All he had were questions and speculations but no concrete plans. Whatever sent him back in time could have at least given him the courtesy of sending him days or even weeks before the journey to the Conclave. That way, he could have planned better for it.

Or maybe the extra time would have just given him the chance to run away.

This was probably for the best then.

Upon arrival at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, he made himself scarce as he navigated the corridors to find Justinia, pulling the hood of his cloak up so his vallaslin and features couldn't be clearly seen, taking care to avoid Leliana's agents.

Most of all, he wanted to avoid—

Cassandra turned into the corridor he was in.

Lavellan froze, his ears ringing, metal filling his nose.

Cassandra slumped over the dagger he'd buried into her stomach and all he could say was, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," as profuse as the blood spilling over his hand and his body wouldn't follow him. Wouldn't obey. He couldn't even shoot Solas a venomous glare or beg him to stop. Couldn't do that past the tears and the shriek of the Well in his ears anyway.

His heart raced and his mouth dried.

Cassandra stared at him curiously and stopped walking.

There wasn't any air in his lungs.

"Is everything in order?" she asked and reached for him. "Are you lost—"

Lavellan smacked her arm away and bolted, not registering his surroundings, just focused on *running*.

What shitty luck. Of everyone to run into within this massive temple and all its confusing corridors, it had to be Cassandra. What were the chances of that?

His mad dash led him into a small room and he slammed the door shut behind him, his shallow breaths echoing in his ears. It hurt to breathe.

Pull yourself together.

Lavellan closed his eyes and swallowed the nausea back down.

He thought he'd been ready.

No, he *had* been ready. That encounter had just... caught him off-guard. It would be fine. He would be fine.

Focus.

He wrangled his breaths and thoughts back under control. Once he regained his bearings, he left the room and did his best to retrace his steps, his heart calming the more he concentrated on the task at hand.

Cassandra must have deemed his earlier behaviour suspect because the previously empty corridors were now being patrolled by a few agents. Lavellan had a few close calls, but he managed to evade them.

When his surroundings became faintly familiar, he hurried his pace.

“Someone help me!”

He sprinted.

A familiar set of doors waited for him at the end of a corridor. He stormed through them.

"Get away from her!"

Corypheus turned in alarm.

Justinia knocked the orb out of his hand and sent it reeling towards Lavellan.

Lavellan reached for it.

Metal pressed against his palm. Green fire raced through his nerves and turned him into light. All he could do was laugh in his mind.

The pain had returned. His armour was rebuilding.

Light flashed—

He was plunged into darkness and cold stone floors, bound and kneeling. The Anchor flared with agony. He hissed through gritted teeth and doubled over.

The door swung open, the shadows of two familiar silhouettes spilling across the floor. Cassandra neared. Her gait was unmistakable, ready for the world with an iron will and a burning heart.

She stopped in front of him and all he could do was look at her boots and note how many creases there were in the leather. He remembered when she'd swapped them out for steel-tipped boots. For kicking purposes, mainly, but also, an arrow had landed dangerously close to her foot once and she'd decided it was better to take precautions before she could find new holes in her feet.

Turned out she needn't have worried about holes in her feet. He would have given her one through

the stomach.

"I am honoured to have met and fought beside you, Inquisitor."

No, stop—

"*You* were the one I met in the corridor," Cassandra said, her rage veiling the loss and grief simmering beneath. "And now you are the only survivor of the Conclave."

So he'd failed to save the Divine in the Fade.

Lavellan took a steadying breath and finally met Cassandra's eyes. They burned, searing into him, desperate for and demanding answers. The seeking Seeker.

"I can explain," he promised.

Leliana stepped closer, shrewd eyes pinning him in place. She'd been Divine Victoria. Ruthless, cold, silencing any who'd dared oppose her.

"Go on," said Leliana.

Leliana he could bear to look at. Leliana who he'd glanced at after he'd killed Cassandra. She'd been hidden up a hillside with an arrow nocked, and he'd begged her with his eyes to loose the arrow and kill him before Solas could use him to hurt anyone else. She'd hesitated then. He'd almost laughed. The Divine who had reddened the Sunburst Throne had *hesitated*.

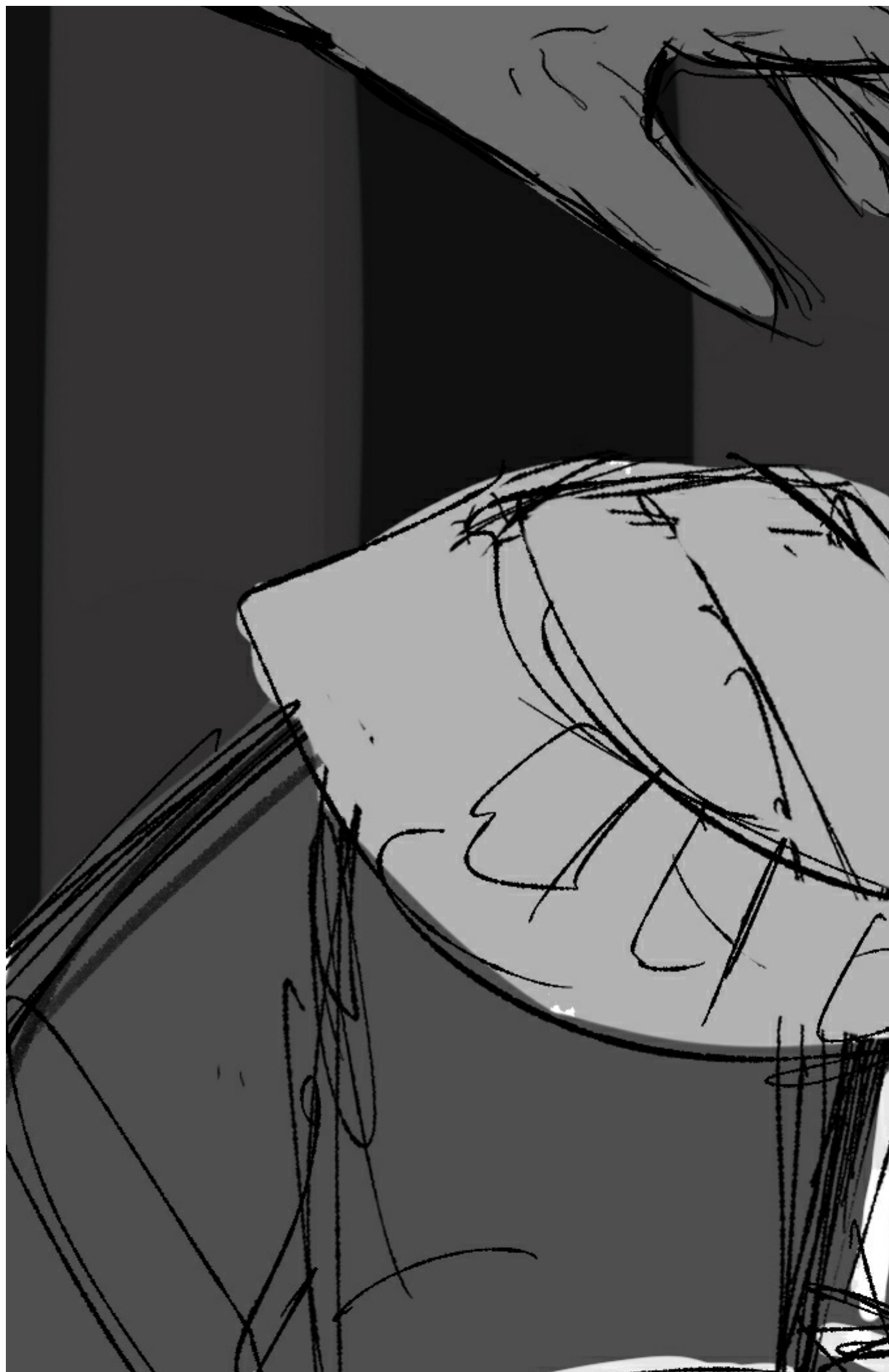
"My clan sent me to spy on the Conclave to see whether the decisions that would be made that day would be detrimental for us," he admitted. "I entered the Temple before the meeting began to scout the area, but then, I came across her—" he nodded at Cassandra— "and I panicked." Not a lie. Just that it was for a different reason. "But my intention wasn't murder. A few minutes after that encounter, I heard the Divine screaming for help. I..."

How much should he reveal? Should he reveal Corypheus? If he did, they may become more focused on reaching him, and that could alter the course of events in a way that would make it harder to remain a step ahead of Corypheus.

"I tried to help, and there was this... shadow." Lavellan frowned. There were vague memories of the Fade, but they were wisps in his periphery. "My memory stops there. Something is interfering with it."

Cassandra grabbed him by the edges of his coat. "You're lying!"









Leliana eased her away and Lavellan bit his lip in frustration. He'd gotten used to their easy camaraderie. Cassandra had been a supporting constant, a strong foundation who'd held him steady throughout the many difficult choices he'd made, had given him her unwavering faith. Her terribly misplaced unwavering faith. To be at the mercy of her anger wrenched the tight feeling in his stomach even further.

"To what end?" he asked.

"It's convenient, is it not? That you suddenly don't remember what happened? Or that you just happened to be at the right place at the right time?"

He'd argue that it was the right place at the wrong time.

"You have every right to be upset and suspicious," he said. "I would be too. But please... All I know is that people have died. I think I can help with this." He moved his hand in the stocks, still pulsing green though it was absent of pain. For now. "I couldn't help the Divine. Let me help everyone else she left behind."

Cassandra shared a look with Leliana.

"Why would a Dalish elf concern himself with the affairs of humans?" Leliana asked, crossing her arms and eyeing him. "Much less want to help them?"

"I'm Dalish, not a monster," he snapped.

Leliana only frowned further.

"This affects the elves just as much as the humans. Why would I murder the Divine? That would bring wrath upon the elves. They've suffered enough." And they will suffer more.

The two were silent, the green light of the Anchor flickering over the slopes of their faces, glinting in their eyes.

Cassandra sighed and faced Leliana. "I'll take him to the rift. I'll meet you at the forward camp."

Leliana threw him a final, scrutinising look, then nodded and left the two. Cassandra tugged on Lavellan's shackles and he rose, watching as she replaced them with rope.

"I suspect that the mark is tied to the Breach," said Cassandra. "If we can test it on something smaller, perhaps we can determine if it's the key to stopping all this."

Lavellan watched the Anchor's green light dancing over his skin. "I think you may be right."

Leaving the Chantry and seeing Haven again was like a punch to the gut. The frigid wind bit at his cheeks.

He'd left Haven buried under snow, then they'd returned to reclaim it while hunting Solas down,

and now here they all were again. It always seemed to return here.

The Breach hovered in the sky, pulsing like a sickly heart, and he could feel the stirrings of pain from the Breach's expansion swelling like the waves of the Waking Sea.

Accusatory eyes fell upon him. Faces of the dead or of old friends stared at him as they passed. He didn't doubt that they'd throw stones at him if Cassandra wasn't here.

They needn't throw stones, however. The Breach expanded again and the Anchor pulsed with searing heat. It took him by surprise and he staggered

Cassandra steadied him, and for a while, he could pretend that this was the Cassandra he knew. The one who'd supported without words needed.

She glanced at the Breach, then his hand. "It's killing you," she noted.

I'm already dead.

"It can try," he said instead.

That, at least, made her lips twitch, but she turned around before he could be sure.

Once out of Haven's gates and on the bridge (the whole walk spent in a silence of one-sided animosity), she cut his bindings. He rubbed his chafed wrists. Still, it felt surreal to have a left wrist at all, to touch things and *feel* their texture, feel the give of the skin on his fingertips

"For what it's worth," he murmured, glancing down, "I'm sorry. You lost somebody important."

Cassandra had been silent thus far. It was so long ago that he couldn't remember the exact details, but he was sure she'd talked to him throughout the walk at least. Finally, she tipped her head in acknowledgement. He supposed that was the best he could ask for.

"We need to move, before the mark and the Breach spreads," she said.

He agreed and they set off.

Amidst all this, Lavellan had momentarily forgotten about the existence of demons. That was, until a streak of green light spewed from the Breach and smashed into the bridge they were walking on. They fell and rolled onto the frozen river.

The ice throbbed with pocks of green and black, ready for the demon's surfacing. Cassandra pushed him behind her, sword and shield ready.

"Stay back!" she cried as the demon burst forth.

She chased the demon off but a new node pulsed in front of him. Lavellan cursed and searched for a weapon, grabbed a pair of daggers half-hidden by the toppled crates. By the time the demon had surfaced, he was already rushing at it.

It was strange, fighting with two daggers once more, but he adapted.

The fight was easy enough. Once he felled the demon, he turned.

And faced the point of Cassandra's sword.

"Drop your weapon!" she ordered.

“Demons are dropping from the Breach,” he said in a tone that he hoped was placating. “I need to be able to protect myself. I don’t want to become a liability to you.”

Cassandra regarded him, still cautious, but her sword lowered the slightest.

“Stab me in the back and I will slit your throat,” she warned and sheathed her sword. Lavellan fell into visions of blood, steel, *Cassandra forgive me—*

“I can walk in front if that worries you,” he said and hoped his voice wasn’t as choked as he thought it sounded.

She paused, then sighed and slowed down so that they could walk together.

“No, forgive me,” she said. “That was unfair of me. You have been nothing but cooperative. I may not know the true extent of your intentions but you promised to help, this I know.”

“You’re right to be wary. After all, I may sacrifice you to the Dalish gods while you’re not looking.”

She cracked a wry smile. “I would not make a good sacrifice.”

“No?”

“I would yell too much.”

Lavellan snorted and they continued through the valley. He ignored the remorse spilling out of him with every step. Even if he *knew* that it hadn’t been intentional, that it had been Solas’ geas from the Well of Sorrows that had made Lavellan kill her, she’d still died from his hand. He was still the one who’d held the dagger.

He focused on slashing through the wraiths and demons instead, paid his silent respects whenever they passed by those who’d died.

Lavellan soon spotted the rift just up the hill and dread filled him. Cassandra rushed up the stairs.

“Quick! You can hear the fighting!” she urged.

Lavellan followed, feeling as though he were slogging through molasses.

He was right to dread when he saw the Dread in the distance, back into the guise of humble apostate. The world spun, that rift a constant in the slurry of colours and moving shapes and—

Snap out of it!

Lavellan tore his gaze away and focused on fighting a demon that had materialised in front of him.

In his periphery, he spied a demon creeping up behind Solas.

And despite himself, despite all that had happened, Lavellan still put himself between Solas and the demon. He narrowly dodged the demon’s strike, and immediately counterattacked.

He dealt a killing blow and the demon fell.

“*Thank you, lethallin.*”

“*Getting slow, hahren?*”

Once all the demons were taken care of, the rift's furious shards relaxed into a nebulous tremble. He knew what he had to do, but Solas grabbed Lavellan's wrist and suddenly there was no world, there was no Haven, no valley, no demons. Only Fen'Harel as his eyes glowed blue and Lavellan's body betrayed him.

No, never again!

"*Don't!*" he snapped, dagger already flashing.

Fen'Harel's expression shifted into shock and the world returned to clarity.

Lavellan's stomach lurched with horror and he stopped in time, the dagger hovering over Solas' throat.

Solas let go of his wrist and Lavellan recoiled, wrung tight, breaths rapid.

Elgar'nan's backside, he'd almost skewered Solas.

Well, you technically already did.

"Ir abelas," said Lavellan. "I was..."

He was unable to continue. An uncertain and tense silence hung in the air.

Lavellan looked away and took a few, deep breaths.

So what if you kill him? That'll be for the best, right? And he's weakened now. It wouldn't be a problem.

"The fault is mine," said Solas and Lavellan almost wept at his voice. Get a grip. "I should have waited for the adrenaline of battle to fade."

Lavellan could only nod, throat dry.

"I was wondering if perhaps your mark could close the rifts," Solas offered.

"Right." Lavellan cleared his throat and held his hand up. Once the Anchor latched onto the Veil, Lavellan closed his hand and sealed the rift. It'd been years since he'd done this, but he hadn't forgotten the motions or the strange sensation of his nerves being plucked or the shrill, teeth-grinding noise that the Veil would make as it shut.

The soft howling of the wind joined the uneasy silence.

It was Varric who broke it with a cheery, "Well! Never a boring moment with the company you bring, Seeker." Lavellan calmed at his voice. "Why don't we all start with a *friendly* round of introductions? My name is Varric Tethras. Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally, unwelcome tagalong." He winked at a scowling Cassandra, then nodded at Lavellan. "How about you, Glowey?"

"Mahanon," he said. "Of Clan Lavellan."

Solas tipped his head. "And I am Solas. I am glad to see you are well despite the mark."

"He kept you alive and everything," said Varric. "He knows an awful lot about the weirdest things."

“Thank you,” Lavellan said and forced himself to look Solas in the eye. He battled with the overwhelming urge to either sock him in the jaw or hold him close and never let him go. It was strange to see him in this humble form again. Once Solas had completely assumed the role of Fen’Harel, his presentation had followed, no longer fit for being unassuming, better suited for being the spearhead of an uprising. He’d walked the land like the god his followers had hailed him to be. In dreams, he’d been terrible and lupine and the source of nightmares and ill omens.

Powerful beyond measure.

And yet, he’d looked so miserable.

“You know about—” Lavellan waved his hand, the green light fading— “this, I take it?”

Solas clasped his hands behind his back. “Merely theories.” Bullshit. “I theorised it could close the rifts and it seems I was correct.”

Lavellan waited. Would Solas feel the Well within him? Would he smile and ask Lavellan to protect him, kill those who would kill him? Would he say, “Turn your dagger on yourself and bury it in your heart like you had done with mine?”

No orders came. No blows. Of course not, that’d be ridiculous. He hadn’t absorbed Mythal’s essence yet and so, he had no hold over Lavellan.

Lavellan refocused, tuning into the others’ conversation, but he only caught the tail of it.

“I’m in this, Seeker. Like it or not,” said Varric.

Cassandra turned away with a grunt. Lavellan smiled. He’d missed the two of them.

He glanced at Solas, but he already had his eyes trained on Lavellan.

Lavellan tensed.

Kick Fen’Harel’s backside, Ellana had said. He wasn’t even up to *looking* at Fen’Harel at the moment.

“When you apologised,” said Solas, “you apologised in Elvish.”

“I *am* an elf. Is that a problem?”

“No, I... No. I was merely surprised, considering that I am not Dalish.”

“Elvish is not limited to the Dalish.”

Solas gave him a considering look. “Some of your fellow Dalish would disagree.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“I did not say that.”

You did not say a great many things. Lavellan averted his gaze. “Then shall we get going?”

“Sure,” said Varric, likely eager to get away from whatever awkward atmosphere had descended. “Bianca’s thrilled.” He nudged his shoulder, his crossbow clanking against his back.

Lavellan smiled. “Named after a special someone?” he teased.

“Now, now, what makes you say that?”

“Ah, so I was right.”

“Keep thinking that, Glow.”

Lavellan chuckled, then took up the front as he'd always been accustomed to, marching like he was the Inquisitor once more with his friends guarding his back, and only realised that was strange once Cassandra shot him a look.

He plastered on a grin and shrugged. “See? No stabbing in the back for you.”

His back, however, was completely exposed. Cassandra *may or may not* skewer him, Varric he trusted, but Solas... It was irrational, he knew. Still, he couldn't stop his shoulders from tensing and the hair at the back of his neck from raising.

“What's this about stabbing in the back?” Varric asked.

“She was worried I'd stab her in the back while she wasn't looking and run off. Nothing to worry about if she sees me in front of her.”

“So why haven't you?” Varric asked. “Stabbed her in the back. Or run. Maker knows if I wasn't being watched like a hawk, I would have run, given the chance.”

His tone was joking, but Lavellan could discern the self-deprecation trembling beneath.

“No. You wouldn't,” he answered. Varric could have ran, but he hadn't. Wouldn't. That was just the kind of man he was, somebody who couldn't turn a blind eye to situations where he'd be needed. Dependable when it counted. Prone to exaggerations and self-flagellation, yes, but reliable, nonetheless. Honestly, that described almost everybody in his inner circle.

“Wouldn't he?” asked Cassandra.

Lavellan threw a glance over his shoulder, but he met Solas' eyes and looked away again.

“You were preoccupied with the stranger who fell out of the hole in the sky,” said Lavellan. “Varric could have run then.”

“Uh, yeah. Demons in the valley?” offered Varric.

“Could've avoided them and left everyone to their fates and hop on a ship away from here.”

Varric's grumbles signalled his victory.

Varric had stayed behind to ensure a band of orphans would make it through a war-torn city safely because it had been the right thing to do. Lavellan had lost track of him then. That was the same day that he and Solas had killed each other.

The Breach may currently be spitting out demons but this was still more peaceful than that final battle.

Just as he thought that, the Breach expanded once more and drove him to his knees with pain. Lavellan crashed into the snow, clutching his hand to his chest like a child with a broken arm as sweat broke out on his skin despite the cold. He didn't miss this. It had been worse during the Exalted Council, but that didn't make this any more pleasant.

“Shit,” murmured Varric as he and Cassandra helped Lavellan up.

“We must hurry,” said Solas. He stayed well back, perhaps cautious after Lavellan's earlier attempts to poke holes into him. “This is the extent of what I can do to stabilise the mark.”

“Maybe we should give him a break,” said Varric. “Just sit for a few minutes and enjoy the snow and the demons in the distance.”

Lavellan gritted his teeth. “No. We have to keep going. If it only hurts when the Breach expands, then trying to close it might stop the pain. If I’m lucky.”

“Glowy, you fell out of the Fade. How lucky could you possibly be?”

“I’m alive. That’s got to count for something.”

“That’s not luck,” Varric muttered. “That's a miracle.”

Lavellan pretended not to hear.

They passed a few more demons and rifts along the way. He sorely wished he had the contraption Dagna had made him: a hook with a chain that could pull him towards enemies or objects so he could close distance or escape being crowded. Or even the many flasks he'd carried on him to douse himself in the elements.

But he was just as capable without them.

They helped the Inquisition soldiers eliminate the demons in front of a bridge, then Lavellan closed the rift. He shook his hand out after, the entirety of it tingling like a numbed limb regaining feeling.

They opened the door and yet another dead face greeted him in the far distance, arguing with Leliana. Chancellor Roderick had perished after Haven. Roderick had just been a man afraid, like so many others. He'd been uncertain and unsure so he'd lashed out, desperate to blame *something* lest he succumb to that uncertainty.

Didn’t make him any less of a godawful tit.

“I want him chained and taken to Val Royeaux,” the Chancellor seethed. “He will answer for the Most Holy’s death.”

Lavellan narrowed his eyes and stared the old man down. “Go ahead and try.”

Chancellor Roderick’s lips pulled back into an ugly snarl. “You *caused* this mess!” he accused.

No, the apostate behind Lavellan caused this mess.

“I hadn’t realised you were present to know for sure,” said Lavellan.

Cassandra gripped his shoulder, almost yanking him back. He took that to mean, “Shut up.”

Roderick’s face reddened. “You’re—”

“Our best chance at sealing the Breach,” Cassandra interrupted. “We can stop this before it’s too late.”

“This is futile, Seeker.” Roderick's face fell then, exhaustion pulling his features down. “Abandon this now before more lives are lost. You can’t possibly reach the Temple, even with all your

soldiers.”

“Unless,” Leliana said, “you take the mountain pass. It will take longer, but it’s safer. Our soldiers can charge as a distraction.”

“We’ve lost contact with an entire squad on that path,” said Cassandra

“I did say safer, not safest.”

“This is foolish,” Roderick said.

Cassandra ignored him and turned to Lavellan. “What do you think?”

Lavellan tilted his head with a sour twist to his lips. “Ah, yes, good idea. Ask the *murderer*.”

Roderick glowered. “And you mock me for suspecting you?”

“It was a joke. With you draining the humour and life from the vicinity, someone has to step up and do the world a favour. And you weren’t suspecting; you were ready to tie a noose around my neck.”

Varric subtly elbowed him. “Not now,” he whispered.

Lavellan rubbed a hand down his face. He’d chosen the mountain path before, if only to avoid more Inquisition soldiers and so he wouldn’t have to face any more accusatory stares. His choice would be the same but for different reasons.

“The mountain pass,” he said. “You said we lost contact with an entire squad? There’s a chance they’re still alive. The longer we stay here and argue, the more that chance drops.”

“That will take a longer time,” said Solas. “It will prolong the pain that the mark and the Breach is causing you.”

“So we leave them to die for my own comfort?” he asked. “I counted forty bodies during the trek to this forward camp, Solas, and those were only the ones I saw.” He was long tired of people dying for him. Lavellan turned to Cassandra. “Is that agreeable with you?”

She sighed. “You are the one we have to protect. If I choose the other way, would you charge a different path?”

“Without hesitation.”

“Then that settles it.” She gave Leliana a resolute look. “Bring everyone in the valley.”

As they left, Chancellor Roderick murmured, “On your head be the consequences, Seeker.”

Cassandra forged on ahead.

Raise me up to fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

the tallest shatters hardest—

“You are far from your clan,” noted Solas.

Lavellan resisted sighing and focused instead on hoisting himself up the ladder.

“They sent me to spy on the Conclave,” he said. Please, not now. He wanted to survive the Breach without punching Solas in the teeth first. If he didn’t, he’d just cry otherwise. That wouldn’t be an impressive sight.

Cassandra thankfully cut what promised to be an argument about the Dalish short when she noted that the mine tunnels should be ahead. That distracted Solas enough.

Lavellan hurried through the tunnels and the demons within it before the patrol could become more indiscernible corpses half-buried and scattered in the snow.

When they reached the patrol, they were struggling to fend off the Terror demons. Varric must have invoked all the prominent figures of the Andrastian faith during his cursing when he saw them.

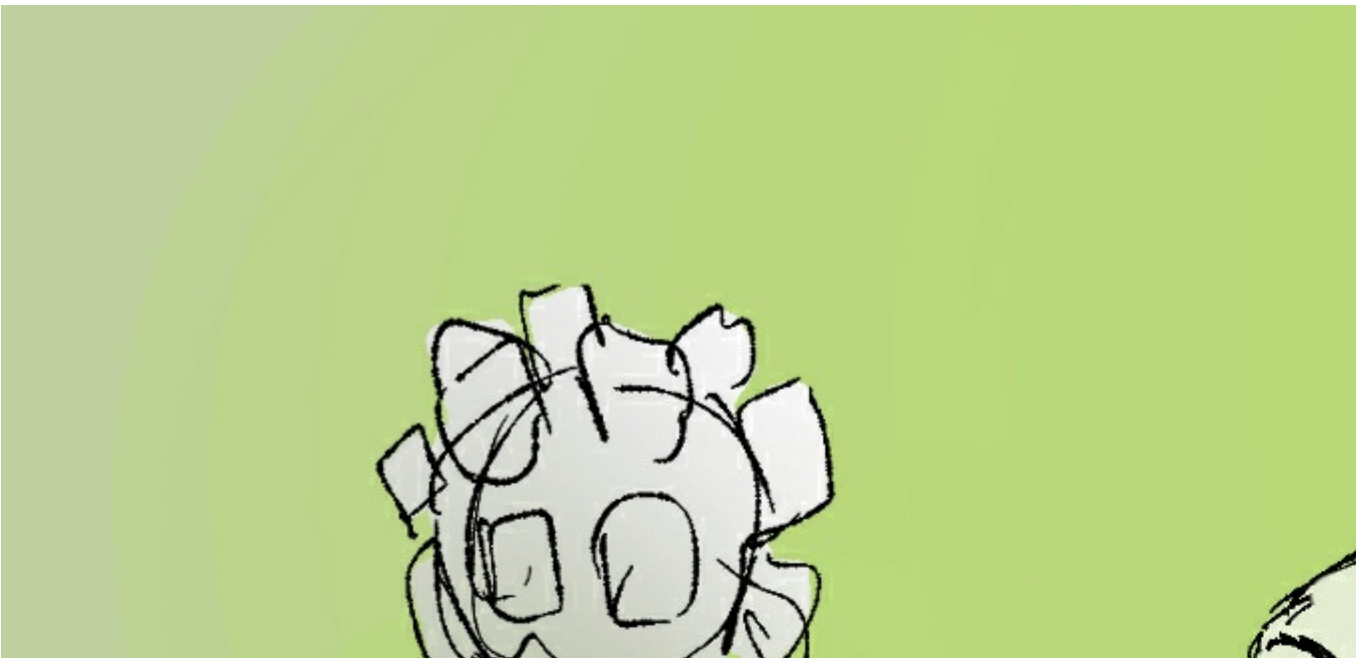
“What in Maferath's balls are *those*?” Varric asked and loosed a bolt.

The Terror demon Lavellan had his eye on crouched, preparing to burrow and reappear beneath somebody unfortunate.

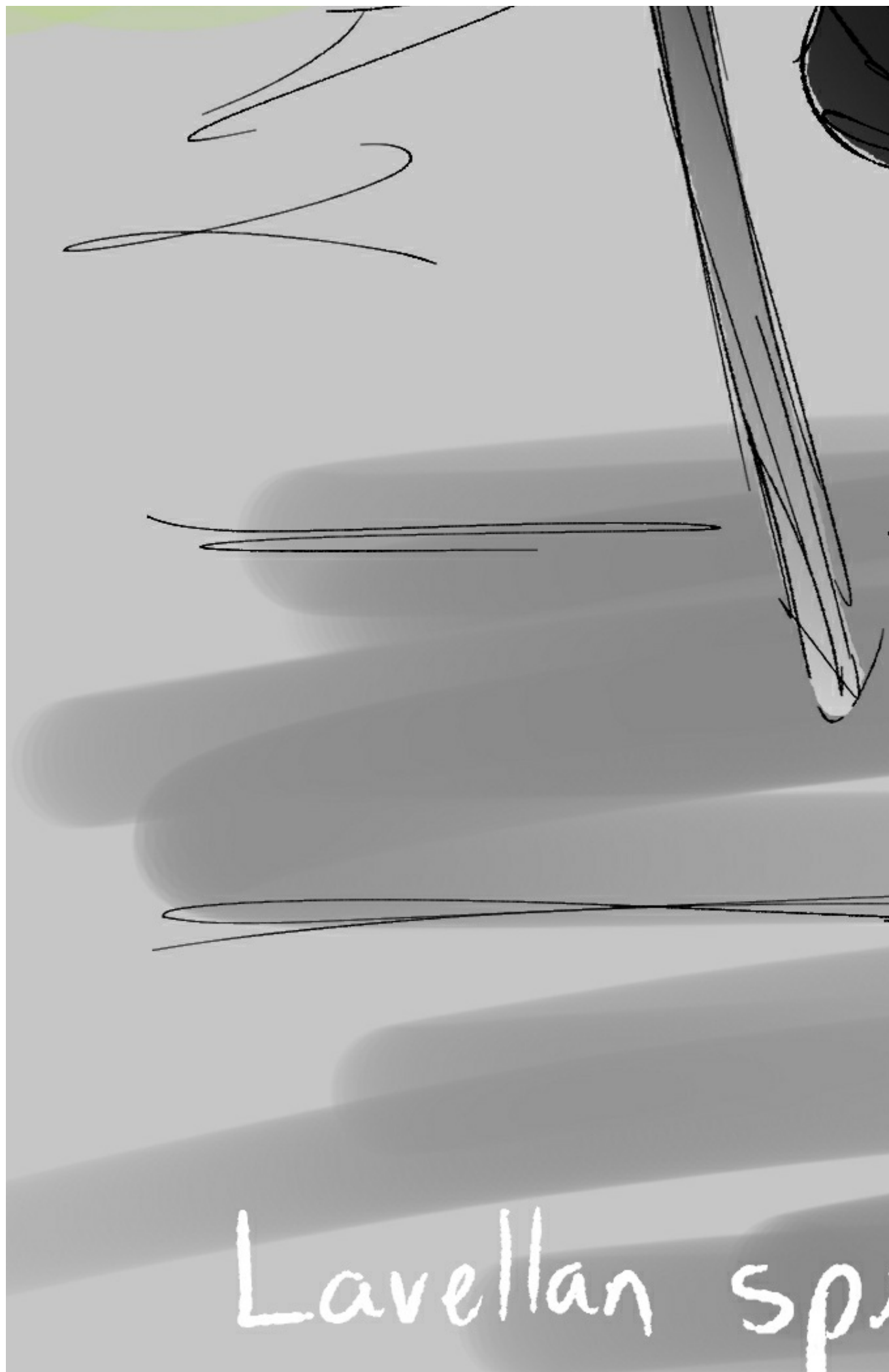
And that somebody unfortunate happened to be Solas.

Lavellan sprinted, barrelled into Solas without giving it much thought.

The Terror sprung from where they'd stood.







Lavellan sp

They crashed into the snow and rolled. The demon came after them with a hollow shriek, claws raised high as Solas threw a barrier up in time to repel the attack. The barrier trembled, shimmered blue. Lavellan scrambled up and made quick work of the demon and helped with the rest.

Once he closed the rift, the scouts approached Cassandra, winded, a few injured, but alive. Lavellan felt a weight lift. A small weight, but a weight, nonetheless.

The scouts made haste to return while they trudged on ahead.

He could feel Solas staring at him.

“You saved me,” Solas said.

Lavellan frowned. “Nothing so dramatic as that.”

“At the very least, you put me out of harm’s way. How did you know that it would surface beneath me?”

“I didn’t,” he lied. “There was a strange green light under you, and I didn’t like the look of it. My instincts ended up being right.”

“Nevertheless, you have my thanks.”

Lavellan nodded, mouth dry.

Reaching the Temple of Sacred Ashes still wasn’t any easier, not with all of the burnt bodies frozen in various poses of despair or agony, arrayed like a morbid painting in a curiosity shop. The stench of them permeated the air. Lavellan took a shaky breath. Not that it helped. The air stuck to the walls of his throat and coated his lungs with its rank.

“Shit,” Varric breathed.

Lavellan couldn’t stand it there a second longer so he moved right along.

And there, stretching impossibly wide, was the Breach in the sky.

“There it is,” murmured Cassandra.

Leliana met up with them then and stationed her scouts and the soldiers around the area. Lavellan kept staring at the Breach. It was easy to lose yourself to it, to glimpse what laid beyond and fall into it like you would into a body of water.

“It would be best not to stare at it for too long,” Solas said, breaking him out of his trance.

Lavellan blinked and shook his head to clear it. “It feels like falling.”

“Yes.”

The sensation was still the same, it seemed.

“Anybody willing to lend me a pair of wings so I can fly up to the Breach?” he joked.

“While that sight would be fascinating,” said Solas, “I suspect sealing the rift below it would suffice.”

“It never just works,” Lavellan mumbled. He wasn’t sure if Solas heard or not. “Let’s find a way down, then. I’d jump over the balcony but I suspect I’ll sprain something.”

They made their way around, stopped short by the crops of red lyrium. Varric recoiled and engaged in an aggressive, whispered conversation with Cassandra.

Solas grimaced. The red lyrium sang a raw, distended elegy which pained most mages to hear and even Lavellan could hear it if he deigned to pay it enough attention. As it was, he was used to ignoring strange, whispering voices at the back of his mind. Still, he gave it a wide berth. Behind him, Solas proposed an explanation for its appearance. Did he know what they actually were?

Lyrium was the blood of the Titans, as Lavellan had discovered during his expedition to the Deep Roads, which was why it could become blighted to form red lyrium.

He eyed the Breach. That would disturb the Titan nearby once again.

“Now is the hour of our victory.”

Lavellan’s nerves grated at the voice.

That pulled his companions’ conversation short.

“What are we hearing?” Cassandra asked.

“At a guess, the person who created the Breach,” said Solas, Corypheus’ voice echoing around them.

They finally reached the lowest area of the Temple where the rift and even further, the Breach, eddied the skies above.

“Someone help me!”

Cassandra froze at the voice.

The Anchor flared and showered them with light before anybody could question it. Once their vision righted, echoes of the past lingered. There loomed Corypheus’ shadow before them, red eyes aflame, and Divine Justinia helpless and bound beside him. Lavellan saw himself storm in.

“Get away from her!”

The visions vanished, settled like a still lake in a summer afternoon.

Cassandra whirled on him. “You were there?” she asked but it held no accusation like before. “Most Holy called out to you and you tried to help her?” She scowled. “No... Who was that? Can we even trust such a vision?”

“These are echoes of the Fade,” said Solas. “It warps events but never in a way that is untrue. For now, these questions must be saved for later. Our priority is sealing the Breach.”

She narrowed her eyes. “*Warps events?*”

“Never in a way that is untrue,” Solas stressed. Warped things in a way that was still truth. Yes, that sounded an awful lot like a certain someone. “The rift is closed, albeit temporarily. To seal it

properly, it must be opened again.”

“More demons,” Varric mumbled.

Solas nodded.

“But—” Cassandra started.

“Seeker,” Lavellan interrupted gently. “Act first, questions later.” She shot him a withering glare, but that wasn't enough to cow him. After a beat, she relented with a sigh and ordered the soldiers to stand ready.

Lavellan held a hand up to open the rift, tried to recall which demon would step out. Pride demon, he wagered. He stole a glance at Solas.

Well, they already had one here.

It was indeed a Pride demon that stepped out from the rift. To everyone here who had only been accustomed to the shades and wraiths and occasional Terror, this Pride demon must seem formidable. Varric invoked everyone in the Andrastian faith once more with the added blasphemy of including their private bits.

And all was chaos.

Lavellan had battled multiple Pride demons at the same time before, though he certainly didn't have the gear for them now. No flasks to give him boosts, no specialised armour, no enchanted daggers.

Could he sunder the Veil momentarily with the Anchor and pull the demons back into the Fade? Or stun them at the very least.

No, better not. There were too many clustered around the Pride demon and it would catch them in its area.

It was a careful balance of disrupting the rift and attacking. Any demons who dared to approach him while he disrupted the rift either met his blade, a bolt, or a blast of fire. Varric and Solas had his back, it seemed. He tried not to let that open the unwanted baggage of emotions in him.

The Pride demon finally fell, Leliana riding on its head with her dagger in one of its eyes and an arrow in another.

“Now!” cried Solas.

Lavellan threw his hand up to the rift. It wouldn't work, but he tried anyway. If the Breach did close earlier than it had before, what would happen?

Bring Corypheus' army bearing down upon you.

He balked but had no time to consider that possibility because the world shattered into white and blew everyone away.

He awoke to the wooden rafters in a little cabin in Haven.

His mouth twisted. It didn't work.

The Anchor was no longer being a little piss though, so the Breach had stabilised at the very least. Lavellan pushed himself up on the bed, saw the snow outside the window, felt the chill in the air. He was back in Haven.

He dropped his head in his hands. So far, things had followed their previous course. If he was planning to alter things, he had to figure out what to alter and how to do it.

Stick a bigger middle finger to Corypheus this time, then stick an even bigger one to Fen'Harel, was his thought. It sounded like Ellana.

The door opened and an elf walked in. Oh, he recognised her! She'd been able to make it out of Haven after Corypheus had attacked and then she'd settled down in the Hinterlands once he'd disbanded the Inquisition. What was her name again...?

She dropped her package once she saw he was awake.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were awake, I swear!" she said.

"No harm," he said and rose, intending to pick up her fallen package for her.

She fell to her knees. "I beg your forgiveness, and blessing. You're in Haven, my lord. They say you've saved us and stopped the Breach from getting any bigger."

He made sure to move slow as he picked up what she'd dropped, offering them to her with a soft smile. "Nothing to forgive. Please stand."

She looked at the offered items as if they were a curse. Not on her but on him. She quickly gathered them in her arms and scrambled up.

"I was— Take them here, I—" She set them down on the opposite table and was practically ready to scurry out the door. "The Seeker will want to know you've wakened. At once, she said!" Lavellan could only blink in befuddlement as she flew past him in her haste. "At the Chantry, with the Lord Chancellor. At once!"

"Wait—"

And she was out the door. Lavellan stared after her, then sighed. He never got the chance to ask what her name was.

He looked down at himself. And so, he was Herald once more. He'd wanted to run from it before and had vehemently refused any time anyone so much as hinted at him being the Herald of Andraste. Even now, it didn't sit well with him.

Lavellan glanced out the window. People had gathered in front of the cabin, arraying themselves in lines. As if it were his procession.

First order of business. He slipped his armour on and breathed easier.

Today would be the birth of the Inquisition and the birth of the Herald of Andraste. Would he claim it, this time?

He was tempted to go through the motions once more, to do the same things, be the same person,

but he was no longer the same from when he had first fallen out of the Fade. Purpose now burned within him. He would deal with Corypheus, and meanwhile manage Fen'Harel. Manage Solas and...

His shoulders slumped. Could he even accomplish that?

He braced himself and opened the door. The line of bowing and saluting people sent an uncomfortable press in his lungs. They murmured, whispered, looked upon him with reverence. Some with fear.

If Lavellan walked faster than seemed warranted towards the Chantry, nobody would dare bring it up.

"Andraste has sent him in our hour of need!"

"Bless you, Herald, bless you!"

"He saved us all."

The rushing snow was a terrible roar as it raced towards the small village and buried the flames, the dead, and the dying. It was never sanctuary.

It was a trap.

Lavellan slammed the Chantry doors shut and slumped against it, sweat breaking over his skin, breaths gasping, never quite enough. Corypheus would come. He had to prepare for it. People would still die, invoking his name and Andraste's in one dying breath and they would believe it was for the greater good. Would believe their deaths mean something. Even as their own *Herald* failed them.

He covered his mouth, eyes watering, bile swirling within his throat.

"Why didn't you let me die?" he asked whatever power had sent him back.

Arguments filtered from the small door ahead where they would later set up the War Room. Lavellan closed his eyes in order to regain his bearings and practiced the calming technique Josephine had taught him. It had settled him during severe bouts of distress.

Or after waking from nightmares.

Lavellan breathed and engaged his senses, noted what it was he could see, hear, touch, feel, until the hurricane of his thoughts lessened into a softer gale and grounded him back in the present. When he was ready, he pushed himself up. He took a final fortifying breath as he blinked away the tears and marched to the doors.

Chancellor Roderick, Leliana, and Cassandra glanced up at his arrival. Chancellor Roderick seethed.

"Chain him! Prepare him to travel to the capital for trial."

"Disregard that," said Cassandra, looking all ten sorts of disgruntled. "Leave us."

The guards saluted and left. The fuming Chancellor and Seeker launched right back into an argument and Lavellan gravitated closer to Leliana, who was watching from the sidelines. She glanced at him. He hoped she wouldn't be able to tell that he'd been crying.

“There remains an issue,” Leliana finally said and put a swift end to the heating argument. She knew when to watch and when to intervene. Clever Leliana. “Whoever was behind the explosion was somebody Most Holy did not expect. It’s likely they have allies who survived.” Her suspicious look fell on Roderick.

“You cannot possibly think me a suspect!”

“No,” Lavellan agreed.

Roderick crossed his arms and sneered. “You seem awfully sure about that.”

Oh for— He threw his arms up. “I apologise. I’ll do my best to incriminate you much more aggressively from now on.”

“And you still don’t consider him a suspect?” Roderick asked Leliana and Cassandra, completely ignoring Lavellan.

“The Divine called to him for help, and he answered.”

“That thing on his hand? His survival? A set of ridiculous coincidences?”

“Providence,” said Cassandra and Lavellan clenched his jaw. Here it was. “The Maker sent him to us in our hour of need.”

“He’s an elf!”

“Don’t forget Dalish,” he dryly remarked and received a reprimanding look from Cassandra.

“You can’t be serious.” Roderick turned to Cassandra, almost beseeching, and Lavellan took some pity on the man. He really was just frightened. If the order Lavellan belonged to had been upturned and turned leaderless while an unfamiliar organisation lauded an outsider as a saviour, he’d be right pissed about it too. Uncertain, at least.

Still, a tit was a tit regardless of motivation. Understanding was one thing. Tolerating was another.

“Regardless,” said Lavellan, “of my faith or my race or what colour smallclothes I prefer to wear—” Cassandra made a sound halfway between a disapproving groan and a sigh— “I’m here, like it or not. Maybe it was providence, maybe I’m extremely unlucky, but I’ve been given an opportunity to help make things right. I can’t run from it, and I certainly won’t let you take that from me.”

Cassandra stared at him as if he had grown two heads, then she allowed herself a soft smile.

“This is not for you to decide,” said Roderick.

She drew herself up to her full height and retrieved something from behind the room. Lavellan resigned himself.

Cassandra slammed the thick book on the table. The all-seeing eye on its cover peered at him.

“As of this day forth,” she said, “I declare the Inquisition reborn.”

And so it begins.

Lavellan is always five seconds away from either beating Solas up or crying in his arms.

It's the small things

Chapter Notes

CW: Panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

moments held dear or in fear—

The Inquisition had been reborn yesterday but the entire ordeal of that day had taken so much out of him that he'd passed out for most of the day after that meeting. He couldn't remember if it had taken that long to recover last time.

When Lavellan next awoke, it was the afternoon of the day after. He shuffled grouchy out of the cabin he'd claimed for himself. Well, not claimed. They'd given it to him.

In the past, sleep had been difficult. He always had to be wary of rogue Fen'Harel agents who would make attempts on his life while he rested. The mages had it worse, though. Spirits and demons had allied with Fen'Harel, and no mage had been able to sleep in peace since. Vivienne had soldiered on but she'd had her moments of intense quiet.

"Darling, would you so terribly mind fetching me my drink?"

"Any luck sleeping?" he asked and gave her the cup with the concoction she'd brewed to help her body endure the lack of sleep.

"The demons are terribly beside themselves."

Dorian had fared no better, but he'd always hidden it behind a smile or a clever quip.

"If you're going to linger in my doorway looking like a ruffled Chantry sister, I suggest singing a verse from the Canticles to make it more believable."

"Did you sleep?"

"What, and face more of our dear friend's pets? They're all so dreary! Drink with me? I was recently gifted a Nevarran bottle. 50 years, I believe. Will absolutely kill the first layer of your throat."

The fight had slowly killed them. It had been a battle of willpower.

Lavellan wrapped the furs tighter around himself and sought the fire near the tavern. Varric was lingering there today, contemplative as he watched the sky. Lavellan sat on a vacant log and stared at the fire.

"You look like a kitten who's been pushed into a pond," said Varric

"How about a Dalish elf freezing his bits off?" he muttered. "And tired from trying to close a hole in the sky. And fighting off angry Chancellors."

He chuckled. "You slept for three whole days after stabilising the Breach, Glowy. Then you slept for most of yesterday. The Seeker did most of the fighting off the angry Chancellors."

"Ah. Karma for shouting at the world's holy saviour, then." Lavellan leaned his head against his drawn-up knees. The warmth of the fire slowly brought life into him.

"For a holy saviour, you're not looking very holy." Varric sat beside him.

He'd meant to continue the joke, maybe say something witty like, "I apologise, I'll try to glow a bit brighter," but all that came out was a soft, "I don't want to be a holy saviour."

Lavellan blinked at his words. Then buried his head in his knees. After all that talk of wanting to help, he was still the terrified elf from before.

"Hey," said Varric and slung an arm over his shoulders, "I don't blame you. That's a lot to heap on a person in a few days."

He lifted his head. "I'm used to being depended on, to leading, but this is..." He'd been Herald, been Inquisitor, been Fen'Harel's adversary, and finally, his killer. And now... Now he had to do it all over again. Or maybe he wouldn't be able to, this time. Maybe that scared him more. The fact that he may have been given a second chance and that he'd throw it all away.

"No, you're right. It's all bullshit."

Lavellan snorted. "An absolute piss of a tit."

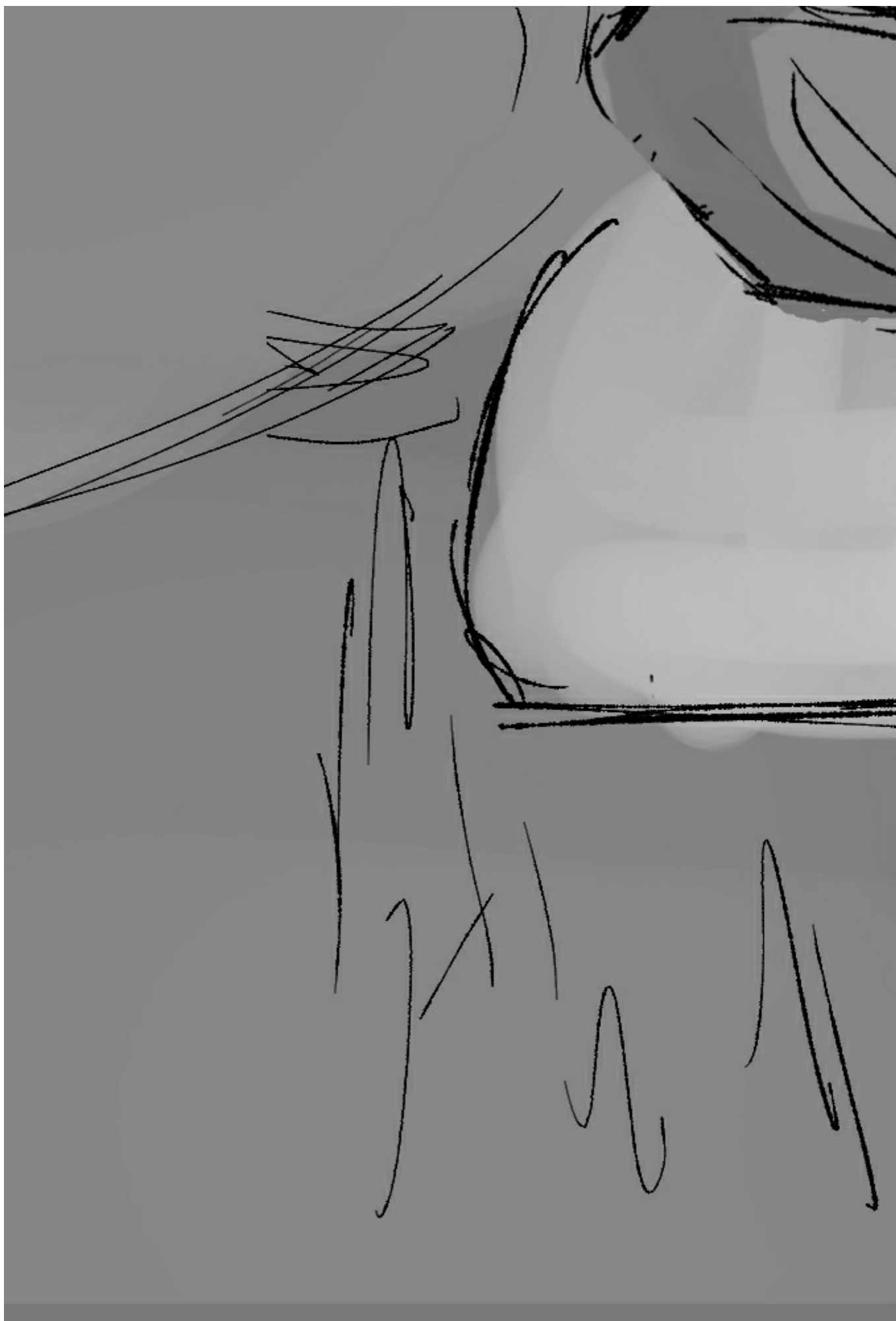
"A bag of druffalo dung."

"Isn't that pretty much the same as bullshit?"

"Agh, you're right. The Seeker's yelling has stunted my creativity."







Lavellan smiled. Count on Varric to lighten the atmosphere.

Varric clapped him on the back. "Things should be calm enough around here for a while. Take a walk, get more sleep. Maybe eat? I don't know, but do something to relax."

It was, of course, at that moment that a woman came up to them and cleared her throat.

"Excuse me, Herald?" she asked.

Lavellan blinked at her, still drowsy. "Yes?"

"Seeker Pentaghost wishes for your presence in the Chantry."

He gave Varric an almost accusatory look. "You summoned her," he grumbled. Varric raised his arms up in innocence. Lavellan sighed and gave the girl a small smile. "I'll be there, thank you."

Standing was a struggle, especially since the fire and furs were warm and Varric was a reassuring presence beside him.

Varric had coaxed him into doing activities in the past; his own little way of telling Lavellan to rest and put away the mantle of Inquisitor if only for a moment. Lavellan, fool that he was, had rejected almost every time. He'd had too much to do, too much to see to. But there would always be too much to do. It was a matter of making time.

In the end, Varric had been a friend but always at arm's length, never close. Lavellan hadn't allowed it. Too caught up in the duties, the struggle.

Maybe this was one thing he could change. Make more time for those he cared about.

"Thank you, Varric," he said. "I appreciate this."

Varric smiled. "Everyone deserves a rest every now and again. Even the holy saviours."

"Especially the holy saviours."

Lavellan walked himself to the Chantry, furs and all. Cassandra would have to deal if the matter was so urgent.

She was by the door when he arrived, staring at the Inquisition banner above the door. The all-seeing eye, the sun, and the sword. Wait, weren't those the symbol of the Seekers, the Chantry, and the Templars respectively? He rubbed his eyes again. Six years and he only just realised now? He would've died without ever making the connection.

Well, if that was his main concern about dying, then he really was out of sorts.

Cassandra turned at his approach and appraised his appearance.

"I just woke up," he explained, "and it's freezing."

"Then let's get you inside where it's warmer."

The Chantry *was* warmer, he'd give her that.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "You slept the whole day yesterday."

"Strangely, a few minutes with Chancellor Roderick drains me of all my energy."

She chuckled then. "A plight we share. And what of the mark?"

He examined his palm. For everybody's talk of it being marked, there were no actual physical marks there. The Anchor simply *was*. No scars, no patterns, no green lines slashed across his hand. "It's been behaved after that dodgy first attempt at the Breach."

Cassandra peered at him. "First attempt? You believe there will be another?"

"You don't strike me as the type to sit idly. Neither am I. If you told me no, I'd run off to do it anyway, I suspect."

"And how would you set out to do that?"

"I was thinking violence didn't work so maybe I'll try serenading it. Give it flowers. Take it to a nice beach to have a picnic."

"Ah. The Herald is humorous," she snorted. "Come to save us all with a joke or two."

"The Breach will seal due to the intensity of its laughs." He smiled. "Even lauded saviours need comedic brilliance in their lives." Otherwise they would become statutes, legends. Although, he'd already done that anyway when he'd rejected his friends' attempts to spend time with him.

"You should speak to Varric then."

"I did."

"Is that why you've been insufferable?" She pushed the doors of the War Room open and stepped in. It was warmer here.

Seeing his three advisors once again pulled something tight within him and he couldn't help but stare in mild wonder at their younger faces. Leliana looked less strict, Josephine was more vibrant, and Cullen was as stern as always but he was coiled tight, as if he would unravel if he so much as relaxed. Now that Lavellan knew to look for the signs, he noticed how Cullen's hands trembled when he rested them on the table, how he sweated even though the mountain air was cold. He was reaching the height of his withdrawal now, if Lavellan remembered right.

"Andaran atish'an," Josephine welcomed.

Lavellan smiled and nodded, appreciative of the gesture. It was the only Elvish she knew for now, but in the past, he'd taught her more phrases.

Once the introductions were out the way, Cassandra pushed forward and cut to the chase as usual.

"Solas believes a second attempt will work provided the mark has more power," she said.

"More power?" asked Cullen. "How can we make sure that it won't hurt the Herald or any of us?"

Lavellan frowned. "Mahanon," he said.

Cullen blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"I'd prefer it if you called me Mahanon. Or Glowy. Varric seems to like that one."

Leliana tilted her head in consideration. "You disagree with being called Herald?"

"Whether I do or don't doesn't matter. People will run off with it and adhere to their ideal vision of what I am. I can't control their actions, but with the people around me, I can at least remind you all that I'm just another idiot stumbling along looking for answers. So, name." Otherwise he'd lose

himself in the role of the title once again.

“Mahanon then,” amended Cullen and Lavellan smiled in approval. “As I was saying, what if we try to weaken the Breach instead of powering up an unknown mark? The Templars could weaken it so.”

“I hadn’t taken you for a speculator, Commander,” said Leliana. “Usually you slice things into submission and call it a day.”

Cullen gave her an unamused look. “Are you still petty about—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Leliana. “The rebel mages could help.”

“You’d fight fire with fire?”

“Well, the point *is* to create a larger one.”

Cullen scowled. “Which could destroy us all.”

“While it is great to consider both,” said Josephine, “we should perhaps consider them if they were *actually* options. Neither group would even deign to give us the time of day. We have also all been denounced by the Chantry.”

“Denouncing the Left and Right Hands of the Divine,” Lavellan mused. “Interesting.”

Leliana’s eyes glimmered as she regarded him. “Who told you about that?”

He met her gaze. “I listen.” Well, no, but yes. He did listen, but he knew the information from before. It was a slip. He had to take better care.

“Either way,” said Josephine, “we’ve been declared heretics for harbouring you. Your title as the Herald of Andraste frightens them.”

It frightened him, too.

“A heavy title,” noted Cullen. “How does it feel?”

“Heavy,” he replied. “But if it lets others hope...”

“I thought you disliked it,” said Cassandra.

“I said it didn’t matter if I did or not. In the company of friends, I’d prefer to not be Herald as well, to not be put upon a pedestal. But out in the world?” He looked down and chewed on his lip. “Let them believe. The world is dark enough as it is. Whatever Herald means to those people, I hope it brings them comfort.” He gripped the edge of the table. “Do try to hit me if my head gets big.”

“Gladly,” said Cassandra.

Lavellan smiled. “Alright. Now, how should we get the attention of the Templars and Mages so that we can argue at length about them later? I look forward to that, by the way. I’ll bring snacks.”

Cassandra kicked his foot.

He gave her a scandalised look. “I haven’t gotten a big head yet!”

“I am extending it to hitting you when you sound too much like Varric.”

“I think,” interrupted Leliana with a small smile, “I have a solution to our current problem.”

Mother Giselle would wait for them in the Hinterlands. Same as before. Cassandra went to fetch Varric, claiming that if Lavellan did it, nothing would ever get done because the two of them would keep distracting each other. Lavellan would take offence if he didn't agree.

That meant he would be the one to ask Solas to come.

He hesitated behind the cabin beside the apothecary. The cabin across it was Solas' and he recalled that Solas enjoyed sitting outside in quiet contemplation.

Lavellan pushed himself forward before he could second-guess himself, but all his mustered courage amounted to nothing because Solas wasn't even there. He grumbled. This was ridiculous. He couldn't possibly continue avoiding Solas the entire time.

Well, while he was here, he may as well visit Apothecary Adan for some potions for the trip.

Snow crunched behind him.

“Ah, the Herald of Andraste.”

Lavellan stumbled, panic filling his muscles and urging them to *move, get away, get away now! The Dread Wolf has come. He is here and he will make you pay—*

Solas steadied him and Lavellan recoiled. Too fast, too suspicious. His touch was like a brand, brighter, sharper than the Anchor could ever be. Was it Lavellan's imagination or did the Well's whispering grow louder? No, he was being ridiculous. This Solas had no grip over the Well's powers.

Lavellan held his marked hand to his chest in a strange, protective motion. His heart raced and he forced himself to calm.

“[Fenedhis](#),” he hissed under his breath and ran his trembling hand through his hair.

Solas made no further movements and stayed still, watching, his stare prickling at Lavellan's skin.

Lavellan still couldn't bring himself to look at Solas so he turned away once more.

“Ir abelas,” said Lavellan. “I did it again.”

“Do I frighten you?” Solas asked, soft, almost lost to the wind. Lavellan's throat seized. No matter how many times he licked his lips, it stayed dry.

“No,” Lavellan answered, glancing at the ground.

“You cannot even bear to look at me.”

Lavellan closed his eyes and took a grounding breath. Thankfully, Solas stayed quiet once more, perhaps recognising what Lavellan was attempting. It was difficult since everything within him was trembling, down to the thinnest fibres of his muscles. His mind raced with disjointed images, cluttered, tangled, all of them filled with blood. Bursting, brimming, building — flooded his throat.

Lavellan drowned.

His breathing ratcheted and he gasped, forced his eyes open.

“No, no,” he mumbled furiously to himself. “It isn’t working.” He clutched his hands over his ears as if it would stop the memories from spilling over the lip of the bottle.

The world slipped out of focus.

A flash of green by his periphery, a presence beside him.

“Mahanon,” the voice said. It was soothing. Lulling. And sharp. It was a point of focus and he latched onto it. “Mahanon, I’m here. Where are you?”

Where was he? He didn’t know. He said as much.

“Mahanon, is it cold where you are?”

Cold? “No... It’s...” Fire and smoke and death clogging his lungs. “It’s fire.”

“No, Mahanon. There is no fire. You are in Haven, within the Inquisition’s camp. There is snow, and it is cold. Can you feel the chill upon your skin?”

Electricity. He tasted it in his mouth and it paralysed him, but no, it wasn’t electricity that had him paralysed. He was glowing blue and the Wolf was staring him down and where had they gone so wrong?

“Mahanon, may I touch you?”

Lavellan fell further every moment and no, he’d lose himself. Hold on.

“I’m falling,” he gasped.

“No. You are safe. I am going to hold your wrist and I will put something in your hand. It will not be dangerous. You are safe. I am here so you will be safe. Here, I am placing it upon your palm. Can you feel it?”

It was cool, solid, smooth, irregular, but it fit within his palm.

He nodded.

“What is its temperature?”

“It’s cold.”

“Very good. Its surface?”

“Smooth. It... tapers at the bottom.”

“Yes. Will you open your eyes? You will see me beside you, do not worry. My name is Solas.”

Solas. Of course. Solas. He had a melodic voice, shifting with every story he told, soft in that wondrous way when he spoke of the things he loved. Lavellan opened his eyes and there was a stone in his hand. Black, but not heavy.

“Well done,” said Solas. “What is your name?”

Lavellan swallowed, licked his lips so he could move his dried mouth. “Mahanon,” he rasped.

“Where are you now?”

The wind stung his cheeks and the tips of his ears, but it was a humid chill. The sky had patches of blue peering through the curtain of grey, threading with green the closer it approached the Breach. His breath fogged when he exhaled.

“Haven,” he said.

There was warmth around his right wrist. The one holding the rock. It was Solas’ hand, gentle yet firm, grounding. Haven. He was in Haven, the Inquisition had formed yesterday, and they were off to the Hinterlands, and he was meant to ask Solas to accompany them. And then he went and fucked it all up.

Lavellan rubbed his eyes. “Shit,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” said Solas firmly. “That was not within your control. I am the one who is sorry. I should have announced my presence.”

Lavellan tried for a smile but it was trembling at the edges. “I *am* a little jumpy.”

Solas smiled back. “Only a little.” He let go of Lavellan and his wrists felt bare. Exposed. Yet safe at the same time. It made no sense. “Can you stand? Or would you prefer to retreat to somewhere safe?”

He hugged himself. “Somewhere warm.”

“Ah, this fell earlier.” Solas placed the fur over Lavellan's shoulders. Lavellan clutched it tight around him and felt a little more put-together. “As for warm, my cabin is there. It should suffice should you wish to regain your bearings. If my presence provides discomfort, I can leave you be or send for someone else who you would prefer to be with you.”

It was perhaps a moment of weakness when Lavellan said, “I’d rather you stay with me.” But he didn't want to think on it too much.

"Are you certain? I am the one who caused you distress."

"Stay," he said, more firmly.

Solas nodded and said nothing else. He walked Lavellan gently to the cabin — the small and tidy cabin full of even smaller memories and faded conversations from when they'd first met. Lavellan stared at the corner seat where he'd sat while listening to Solas' stories, expected to feel a twisting in his heart, but there was only a strange yet grounding serenity.

Maybe there still remained untainted pieces of their past.

Solas sat Lavellan down on his bed.

"Ir abelas," Lavellan said again. "I hadn't meant to..." His mouth twisted.

Solas pulled up a chair and sat facing Lavellan. “Was it because I surprised you?”

“I... Yes and no.”

“Was it because it was me, specifically, who surprised you?”

Lavellan's silence was enough of an answer. Solas didn't seem offended, only deeply troubled.

"May I ask why?"

Oh Creators, how the hell to answer *that*.

"You..." Lavellan fished in his head for answers. "There's someone in the past who... You reminded me of them."

"My appearance?"

"No," he said. It wasn't a complete lie. Fen'Harel the god was separate from Solas the mage in his head. Better he thought them separate for now. "The general stature. Although he was taller," he joked but Solas wasn't letting him escape through that avenue and it fell flat anyway. Lavellan realised he was still holding onto the rock.

Solas hummed in thought. "Then perhaps it is best if I leave."

"Wait, what?"

"You are a permanent fixture of the Inquisition. I would prefer to stay and help, of course, however if I am a source of discomfort or burden for you, then perhaps it is best if I take my leave. You have a very important role. I would not wish to jeopardise it."

"Stay," Lavellan declared again. Solas' brows raised in silent surprise. Lavellan worked on stringing together a proper sentence instead of hurling one-worded answers like an uncivilised brute. "You are just as vital as I am to the Inquisition. Please stay. Your help would be greatly appreciated."

Gods above, look at this. He was managing a conversation with Solas! Perhaps he could do this after all.

"Comparing an elven apostate to the fabled Herald of Andraste?" he asked.

He frowned. "The Fade spat me out and I have a magical mark on my hand, yes, but that doesn't put me above anybody. It means I have a part to play in helping restore peace and a means to do it, as do you, as does Cassandra, as does Varric and Leliana and Cullen and Josephine. Every healer, every soldier, even angry Chancellors. This Inquisition is a set of parts all working together and forming a whole."

Solas regarded him and his words and hummed. "It is certainly an idealistic way of looking at things," he said, "but I will have to disagree. Yes, we all certainly have our parts to play, yet you are the biggest gear. Whether you wished for it or not, you may yet shape the course of our actions." Oh, he knew. He knew too well. "But the people have raised you. They do not take well to their heroes descending the pillars that they have been elevated to."

"You're saying they want me up there."

"It is not a matter of want. Rather, that of necessity."

Lavellan sighed. "It's quite lonely up there," he said. "Could I come down every once in a while? Pick some flowers with them? Maybe play a round of Diamondback."

"I am unfamiliar with the game."

It was such a simple memory, but he still recalled it. Blackwall had told him of how swiftly Solas had learned the game. Then, he'd promptly bested Blackwall after and had made him walk back in shame across Skyhold in the nude.

Lavellan's lips twitched. "You strike me as the type who picks things up quickly."

"Careful of first impressions, Herald."

"Mahanon," he corrected on reflex. "Call me by name. Consider it my way of descending my pillar of holy holiness to interact with the peasants."

"Ah, yes. The peasants cherish this precious time you spend with us."

Lavellan snorted. This was nice. Solas was nice when he wasn't trying to end the world.

"Do you plan on correcting every single person who calls you Herald?" asked Solas. "I assume it would put a lot of people off. Or intimidate them. It is such a personal thing, to call you by your name when they see you as someone greater. Either that, or to invoke your name will become as sacred as invoking Andraste's."

He would dismiss Solas if he didn't know of its truth.

"I know," he murmured. "But I'd at least prefer to be known as myself with the people I'm working closely with. Nicknames are open. Varric's come up with Glowzy so far. I think there's more brewing in that scheming head of his." Lavellan had relaxed now, less cold even if his fingers were still shaking. "I need to be known as something other than Herald. Otherwise..." He ran his thumb over the stone's surface. "Otherwise I'll lose myself in it."

"How so?"

Lavellan gave Solas a curious glance. This was strange. Usually he was the one asking Solas questions.

"I'll become only Herald," he said, "and lose who I am. I'll try to be who they want me to be and forget about myself. I might become a terrible thing, fit only for legends, and forget what it is to be imperfect. To be... me. To be another flawed person blindly staggering, moving through life, just hoping to do what they think is right. The thought of it is lonely. Terrifying."

And maybe that was what had happened to Solas. He became Fen'Harel and abandoned Solas, became the Dread Wolf the others feared or expected him to be. His agents had seen a god; their saviour and champion. The rest of the world had seen an unforgivable beast.

There had been no room for Solas between deification and desolation.

Lavellan took another breath but it was heavy. "Apologies, we got sidetracked. I was looking for you for a reason. We're setting out for the Hinterlands to meet with a Chantry mother. Mother Giselle, they said. I was hoping you could accompany us."

"You do not mind my company?" he asked.

Did he? "I certainly can't keep jumping from you and the only way to do that is to establish that you're not a threat. If I can get familiarised to you, then..." This was tricky. "And I'm talking to you now, aren't I? It's a good first step."

Solas observed the scenery outside the window, arms crossed. He glanced back at Lavellan. "Very

well. I will stay. But first, I would like to know how I can help minimise the risks of sending you into distress.”

“Announce your presence, somehow. I think that would help greatly.” Solas nodded. “And... I suppose, tell me if you plan to touch me. At least, until I grow comfortable with it. Also, thank you. For earlier. I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“No. You required assistance and I was glad I could provide it.”

It was silent for a few breaths. They weren’t strangers so it wasn’t discomfiting, but they weren’t familiar enough with each other for it to be comfortable. They were stuck in the middle.

Solas pursed his lips. “This person who you said I vaguely resemble... Am I permitted to ask about them? You do not have to answer.”

Lavellan traced the stone with his nails, turning the question over as he searched for an answer.

He looked up and forced himself to look Solas in the eye.

“I killed him,” he said.

Solas's expression remained impassive. “May I ask why?”

The answer was an easy thing to say, as if the words were sweet wine slipping down his throat.

It began snowing outside. How serene.

“He killed me.”

Silence. Solas may take that however he wanted to, but that was all Lavellan would give.

He certainly hadn’t expected Solas to answer.

“Then perhaps he has given rise to someone stronger.”

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan thinks he can run from his problems using humour.

He's absolutely wrong.

Translation

[1] **Fenedhis:** Wolf dick - A common elven curse [\[1\]](#)

The broken lands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

and fools of change—

The journey to the Hinterlands would take the better half of the day so they set out at dawn the next morning in the hopes that they would arrive just past noon.

Cassandra claimed that the carriage would be too claustrophobic and decided to go on horseback but Lavellan suspected she just didn't want to be stuck with Varric for all that time. Not that it worked. Varric sat beside the carriage driver and annoyed Cassandra anyway.

Lavellan wanted to tear his eyes out. Why must those two keep leaving him alone with Solas?

Not that it mattered in the end since Lavellan slept for most of the journey. He was beyond exhausted. Perhaps it was because he was still as sleep deprived as he had been in the past (he decided it would be the past because to call it the future would make it inevitable), and the exhaustion must have been so immense because he didn't dream.

Varric knocked on the carriage when they arrived. "Rise and shine, beauties. Come out and enjoy the countryside. It's rustic, charming, full of fighting. I think I smell the sound of despair."

Lavellan woke up and blinked groggily, took stock of his surroundings. Solas was across him, head bowed in sleep, but he rose his head, blinked a few times, then he was back to full awareness. Lavellan grumbled. Bastard always could wake *and* fall asleep faster.

Varric opened the door and bowed with a flourish.

Solas was the first to step out. Did he spend the entire ride sleeping, dreaming?

Warmer here than in Haven, but that may be because of the armour Harritt had outfitted him with. Daggers on his hips, bow and arrows slung across his back. Ready for the world. It was a short walk to the forward camp where Scout Lace Harding awaited, and when he saw her, his heart wrenched. She was more youthful for obvious reasons. Vibrant, cheery, less exhausted.

They had all been so tired.

"Herald of Andraste," she greeted. "I've heard the stories. It's rare to find a Dalish elf concerned about what happens to anyone else, but you'll get no back talk here, I promise."

"Careful," said Varric with a chuckle. "He hates being called Herald."

"I don't hate it," huffed Lavellan. He just... greatly disliked it.

"Sorry," she said with a small, apologetic smile. "Do you want me to call you something else?"

He recalled his conversation with Solas. "Whatever you're comfortable with. My name is Mahanon, but... Maybe I've been too forceful with making others call me by name. Might be too intimidating?"

"You could be named Squish and people will still be intimidated either way," said Harding. "I'm

Inquisition Scout Harding, at your service.”

Varric opened his mouth. Lavellan shot him a look.

He closed his mouth.

Scout Harding briefed them of the Hinterland’s state. To summarise: not great. As they headed for the crossroads to find Mother Giselle, Lavellan wracked his brain and tried to recall how restoring the Hinterlands had gone, but it was so long ago that it was a blur.

“Are we absolutely sure this isn’t a trap?” asked Varric. “Mother Giselle sounds like a name that lulls you into a false sense of security. Next thing you know, you’re dead.”

A shadow moved through the trees up a small hill.

“If that’s true,” said Lavellan and kept a subtle eye on it, glad his bow was now in his hand and not still slung across his back, “then be sure to write that down. Make it grand. Something like, ‘The Herald of Andraste made horrible choices and had rotten luck, and so he died. The end.’”

Cassandra made a disgruntled sound. "We will not allow that to pass."

“You can never guarantee anything." In his periphery, he spied a figure move in a way that hinted at a bow being drawn.

Lavellan moved, yanked Cassandra aside.

An arrow buried itself in the ground they had been standing on.

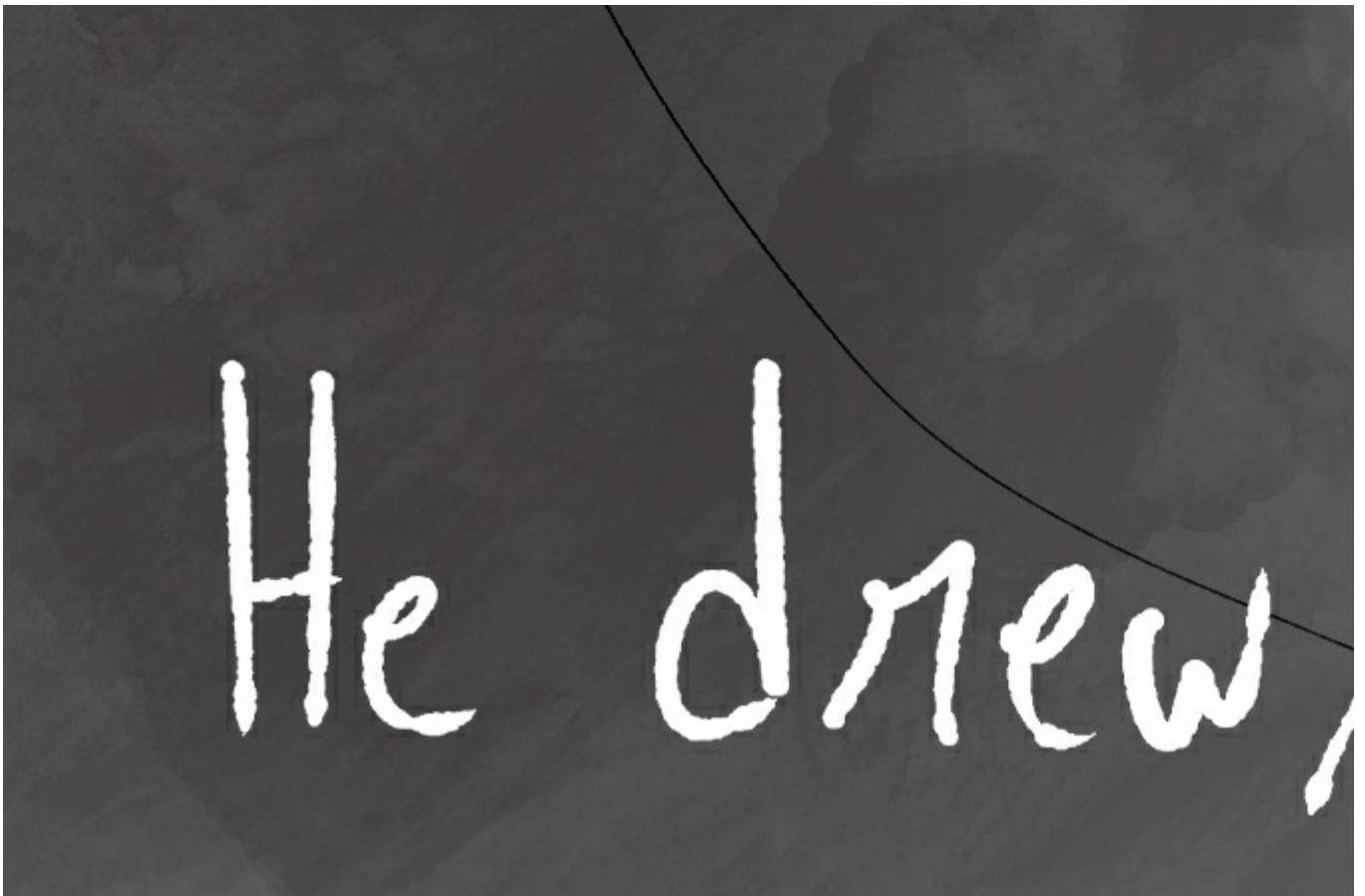
Cassandra unsheathed her sword. “What the—”

He drew, aimed, shot. The arrow found the Templar’s throat and they fell.









“Shit,” said Varric and drew his crossbow. Solas’ staff flickered with flames.

Two Templars attacked, quickly eliminated.

Cassandra looked at him after as she sheathed her sword. “You knew,” she said.

“You could’ve warned us, Glow!”

Lavellan returned an unused arrow back in the quiver. “You know where they are if you don’t startle them.”

Fen’Harel’s agents had been tricky, had dodged and vanished when they’d been noticed. Lavellan had learned to be wary, to never dismiss shifting shadows as imagination. Better paranoid than dead.

“Impressive instincts,” noted Solas, scanning the area for more threats.

Lavellan marched on ahead. “When the beast you’re after is stronger, you have to be smarter.”

They fought through waves of Templars and rebel mages alike and finally reached the crossroads. The refugees had gathered here for shelter, trapped by the fighting. Many glanced up at their arrival. A few looked upon them with hope, but the rest had no space for hope because worry and fear had occupied what little space they could spare. Lavellan bit his lip. There were rows of makeshift tents to the side of the road, occupied by stretchers filled with the injured, and definitely not enough healers to tend to them all.

“Well, this is a lot. Let’s break this down,” he said. “Solas, how are you with healing magic?”

“You are breathing, yes?”

“Sometimes I wonder.” He nodded at the injured. “Think you could lend a hand?”

Solas was silent for a moment, before he nodded. “I believe so. If they will welcome the help of an apostate elf.”

“It’s worth a shot. I’ll come down to help after I finish speaking to Mother Giselle.” He turned to Cassandra and Varric. “Cassandra, what else do you think the refugees need help with?”

She looked towards a small hill where he spied the tops of a few tents and heard the ringing of metal. “Corporal Vale is overseeing the state of the refugees. I can speak to him.”

He nodded. “Varric can you check on individuals? Or help Solas if you know your way around wounds.”

“I think I’ll stay clear of mangled body parts for now, Glow. I’ll talk to a few people. Get a general feel of the situation.”

With their individual tasks in mind, they set off to accomplish them. Mother Giselle was waiting for him, calm and tempered, and Lavellan kept his calm thanks to her. After her advice about dealing with the Chantry, he headed back down and jumped right into helping the injured. The medic was so understaffed that the moment “help” escaped his lips, she dumped dressings and sutures and needles on him and gesticulated in a flurry. Solas only used healing magic intermittently. Conserving energy, maybe. That, or the patients didn’t want to be healed with magic.

It was hectic. They dressed wounds, soothed distress, treated magic-caused injuries. Solas stayed away from those patients which Lavellan supposed was fair enough. They would only be frightened of Solas.

But more patients were ushered in. At that point, Cassandra had returned as well as Varric. Despite his earlier claims, Varric still came and helped with what he could even if it was just wrapping the bandages. Cassandra held down those who thrashed and needed to have arrows removed.

Eventually, they received a reprieve. The medic thanked them profusely for their help.

“I’m afraid the situation won’t get any better so long as there’s fighting,” the medic said.

“The fighting at the King’s Road is the centre of it,” said Varric. “Unfortunately, that’s a major road.”

Lavellan would rub his face but his hands were bloodstained. They went off to clean themselves up and reconvened.

“So, what’s happening?” he asked.

Cassandra sighed. “A lot.”

They spent two weeks in the Hinterlands, ensured the refugees and locals were well-provided for, cleared the strongholds of the rogue Templars and mages, scoured the Hinterlands for caches and rifts, gathered supplies, trained recruits, rescued scouts, and everything in between. That had taken them well into the end of the month.

But the crossroads were safer and so was most of the area. It was good progress.

Varric huffed with every step as they walked back to camp. "I hate hills," he said. "Dwarves have short legs! How do you expect us to keep up with the slopes?"

"By complaining less," grumbled Cassandra.

Lavellan ascended the hill leading to the camp they had set up near the lake. It was almost night.

Varric all but collapsed when they arrived. "I've never done that much walking in my life."

"Yet you were not the barefoot one," said Solas.

He snorted. "That's not my fault."

"Sorry," said Lavellan. His feet were also aching, and fighting the Templars and mages had been tedious and exhausting.

They lit the campfire and sat around it. Solas situated himself slightly away from them, furthest from the fire. He'd always done that. Before, Lavellan had chalked it up to Solas desiring his own space and he'd never thought much of it. Now he knew. Solas didn't want to be closer. To be closer was to acknowledge that they were real, that the world he would plan to destroy held real people and not the featureless shadows of an ancient time.

"We have already caught the Chantry's attention," said Cassandra. "We should have headed for Val Royeaux last week."

"They can wait," Lavellan said without any real sympathy. "I just want to make sure the people here will have what they need first."

"You know, Glowy, you're a little too good to be true."

Lavellan glanced up at Varric. "What do you mean?"

"There are a lot of people in the world who don't give a shit about anyone else." Firelight glinted in Varric's eyes. "And the world just so happened to drop *you* into this mess. It's like you fit perfectly. I'm a little suspicious."

Cassandra scowled. "Not everyone schemes like you. I believe it is providence that he was chosen."

"I'm just saying," said Varric as he leaned forward, staring at Lavellan, "that I've learned not to trust the nice ones. They're usually hiding something."

Lavellan stared back. "After the skeletons in my closet, are we?"

"You admit you have them?"

"Everyone has them, Master Tethras."

Varric shrugged with an air of levity, but the sharpness in his eyes didn't leave. "That's true. I'm just wondering if this really is out of the goodness of your heart or if you're after something else."

"I am," admitted Lavellan. "I'm after getting our voices heard, too. If Mother Giselle wants us to lobby for Chantry support, then it can't hurt that we have the people backing us up. If they spread word about us or call for the Chantry to give the Inquisition a chance, the Chantry will look foolish

or otherwise uncaring if they ignore this. Thus losing the faith of the people.”

Solas made a soft noise in his corner. "How... politically adept of you," he said. First thing he'd said since they'd sat down.

"I've had a while to think. This isn't just a military battle. If we're not careful, the pit of vipers are going to go for our throat."

"They are not vipers," sighed Cassandra. "They are merely frightened."

Lavellan wasn't just referring to the Chantry, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Fear is a powerful catalyst for chaos," said Solas, "but let us hope your Chantry will be reasonable, Seeker."

Oh, Lavellan highly doubted that.

Sleep wouldn't arrive. Lavellan stared at the canvas of the tent, unimpressed, the rushing water of the nearby waterfall mixing with the whispers of the Well. It had been like this for an entire week, the novelty of exhaustion having worn off.

He made a mess of his bedroll before he gave up on sleep altogether and crept out of the tent, careful not to wake anybody, and sat on the edge of the hill overlooking the King's Road. The two moons were brilliant in the dark, one waxing, the other a crescent slit. Lavellan gripped the stone in his palms. It was the same stone Solas had given to ground him in Haven and he wasn't sure why he was still carrying it.

It did soothe him though. Perhaps that was why.

Soft footsteps approached behind him.

Too heavy to be Solas, too much intermittent time between each step to be Varric. Cassandra, then. He was proven right when she sat beside him.

They observed the scenery for a moment, quiet.

Cassandra broke the silence with a sigh.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"No. I keep thinking. And you?"

"Not sleepy."

He flipped the stone in his hands. They returned to the silence and he watched the stars, searching for constellations.

"Did I do the right thing?" Cassandra murmured. Lavellan paused his fiddling and angled his head towards her to show he was listening. "What I have set in motion could destroy everything I have revered my whole life. Will history remember me as a madwoman and a fool? Worse still, will they be correct?" She bowed her head. "I am sorry. It is late and there are doubts. You are

burdened enough without my adding to it.”

Lavellan shook his head. “No. It’s alright. And it’s completely understandable that you have doubts. Things had to be done, and you had the determination to pull forward and do them regardless of what others told you. It’s admirable.”

Cassandra smiled. “And foolish?”

“Maybe a little. But where would we be without the fools who dared to make change?” He drew his legs up and crossed them. “Besides, we can help. There’s no use complaining about something when you know you can be the change you want to see.”

“I agree,” she said. He knew she would.

He gripped the stone tighter. Was it manipulative and selfish to want to gain Cassandra’s approval and knowing how to?

She studied him. “You seem to be taking this all in stride. How are you so calm?”

He was not. He really, really was not.

“The key is to do all the panicking inside,” he joked and laughed softly, but it was quick to fade. The stone had warmed in his left hand. “I’m... coping. As best as I can.”

“I know I make for a poor conversational partner, but should you ever require my help, know that I will do my best to provide it.”

He smiled at her. “Thank you. I appreciate it. Truly.”

They shared another silence, but the night had a way of dulling the corners of awkward silences into something companionable. Almost familiar. He found himself missing Cassandra. She was beside him, yes, but it wasn’t quite the same. Was this how Solas had felt? Missed something that was in front of him yet knowing it wasn’t the same, that it was changed?

“I wanted to say you’ve done well this past week,” she said. “You are a natural leader. You handled the situation within the Hinterlands well.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s natural. I had to learn.” Being the Warleader for four years then Inquisitor for another six was enough to drill leadership into him. “I’m sorry, have I been bossy?”

“If you were, I would not have hesitated to let you know.”

He grinned. True enough.

“You’ve held a position of leadership before?” she asked.

“Yes. I’ve been the Warleader of my clan since I was twenty.” A little twist of the truth, but it wasn’t like he could tell her he had been the Inquisitor when the Inquisition had only been reborn a week ago. “So I’m used to directing others and giving them tasks.”

“I will admit, I do not know much about the Dalish. What is a Warleader?”

“Well, how it sounds. In times of strife when they’re called to battle, the Warleader commands the fighters. Otherwise, they lead hunts. The Dalish are reclusive so I’m not surprised that you don’t know much about them. It’s for that exact purpose that they’re reclusive.”

“Oh, I apologise. Am I asking too much?”

“No, it’s fine. Some clans like mine are more involved with humans than others so we don’t mind. We trade often with a few towns that we pass.”

“Do you miss them?”

He stretched one leg out and pulled one closer to his chest so he could rest his cheek on it. “I miss my sister,” he said. “I miss the hunters I work with.”

Cassandra hummed. “Do you wish to return?”

“I wish I could have stayed,” he murmured. “But I had to leave to keep them safe. I may wish to return, but it’s not a good idea now. Maybe some day, once this is all over.”

If the day would ever come.

“If you ever return, you will be changed.”

He smiled wryly. “I’m already changed.”

It was silent yet again, the sound of the waterfall blanketing them. A passing owl hooted.

Cassandra yawned.

“Get some sleep, Seeker.”

Her face soured. “Don’t call me Seeker. You sound too much like Varric.”

“Cassie. Sandra. Sand. Sandie.”

“Ugh.” She gave his knee a soft whack and stood, dusting herself off. “You should rest too.” She turned to walk back, but she paused and faced him again with a small frown. “You said... I’m still not entirely sure what your opinions are on being the Herald.”

Lavellan met her gaze. “I personally don’t feel chosen,” he said. “However, I won’t take that hope away from other people.”

Cassandra looked down in thought. “So you do not believe in the Maker?”

He had seen the rise of two would-be gods. Or a would-be god and an actual god, depending on who you asked. Either way, he’d had enough of gods for now.

“I believe in a better world,” he finally settled on. “Maker or no.”

She stared at him but he was back to running his thumb over the stone in his hand. What would she say to that?

“A better world,” she murmured, then nodded to herself. Whatever conclusion she’d arrived at, she didn’t deign to inform him. She didn’t look upset though so that was a plus. Cassandra directed her next nod at him, a soft smile on her lips, but he wasn’t sure if that was a trick of the shadows.

“Goodnight, Mahanon. Try to sleep soon.”

“I’ll try.”

In the end, he stayed on that cliff until the stirrings of dawn, stone in hand and eyes on the stars.

Chapter End Notes

I always refuse to leave the Hinterlands until the refugees are taken care of in every playthrough. The cranky old people in the Chantry can WAIT

Hear the bell's tolls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

here the faith falls—

Val Royeaux was beautiful, he wouldn't disagree. With its spires and hanging ribbons and large stone arches, it was a city that awed with its splendour and size even if a funereal atmosphere was hanging in the air due to it being All Soul's Day. They were mourning the dead, mourning Divine Justinia. The city had gathered themselves, a testament to human faith. Beyond that, it reflected Orlais' might and opulence.

And it reminded him that he was awfully, terribly small. That he was an *elf* and that he did not belong here, and that the only time he would belong was if he bowed and broke.

Things had changed somewhat after Briala and Celene had reconciled.

Lavellan scowled, mood darkening.

That had been his mistake. He hadn't known the history between Briala and Celene. He wouldn't make the same mistake this time.

The change from Celene's happiness then hadn't lasted long either. Not that it had mattered in the end. The elves of Orlais had divided between Solas and Briala (and by extension, Lavellan) and had caused all sorts of chaos. Most of Briala's agents had defected to Solas. Lavellan was sure that if it had gone on any longer, Briala would have sided with Solas too.

Like he'd said, it had become a battle of will.

"Such a frightening expression," Solas remarked beside him. Lavellan didn't even spare a glance at the woman who ran from them in fright. "What has placed it there?"

Lavellan smiled sharply. "I am an elf in the city of a nation that makes it a practice to oppress, demean, and marginalise our people. Not the cheeriest place."

Solas looked away. "Our people," he echoed. "You use that phrase so casually. It should mean more... but the Dalish have forgotten that."

Lavellan pressed his lips in his displeasure. "Problem with the Dalish, Solas?"

Wait, why did he even ask? What was the point? He already knew the bloody damn answer and it wasn't as if Solas' answer or stance would change six years in the damn *past*.

"Besides their arrogance in their belief that they are the best preservers of their culture even as they pass down mangled and misheard stories? Quite plenty."

They stared one another down. The stirrings of an argument brewed in the air, like a crackle in the air before a lightning storm.

It was disrupted by a scout running up to meet them and relaying the chaos unfurling within Val Royeaux.

Lavellan pretended that the new information had completely distracted him, but the bitterness still churned and lingered in his veins. And if he gave it enough thought, sadness. Which was why he didn't give it enough thought.

The angered crowd and the Revered Mother's hurled accusations didn't put him in a better mood. By the time the Lord Seeker and his Templars appeared, Lavellan was ready to grab the Lord Seeker's head so he could smash it over his knee. Let the Envy demon enjoy that.

Cassandra's pleas to the Lord Seeker went unheard, as usual, while Solas remained quiet. But Solas had a way of making his quiet heard and it worsened Lavellan's irritation.

"Has the Lord Seeker gone mad?" Cassandra asked, distressed and wrought.

They walked past the gallows and Lavellan eyed it. This was where he could have ended up, dangling with a noose around his neck.

An arrow zipped in front of him, splintered a beam of the gallow's scaffolding. A message had been tied to the shaft with a fluttering, red ribbon.

Some of his dark mood vanished and he hurriedly unwrapped it. It was a note and a map. The note was as vague as always, dashed with that particular brand of Sera. Phalluses had been doodled in the margins as well as little angry faces over areas too far from the clues.

Cassandra peered over his shoulder and made a face.

"What is it?" asked Varric.

Lavellan waved the map, grinning. "A treasure hunt," he said.

His companions stayed at a café while Lavellan trudged around the city in search of the clues. Those who hadn't been present during the Revered Mother's speech gave him an odd look as he passed, but those odd looks were quick to shift to fear, shock, or scandal upon recognition of him.

He ignored them and returned to his companions so he could piece the clues together.

"So let me get this straight," said Varric once Lavellan finished. "She wants us to go to an alley. At sundown. With no explanation besides the promise that she's a friend."

"Friend," Lavellan emphasised. "Capital letter." He looked at the purpling sky. Almost night.

A man approached their table, his garb typical of a Circle mage.

"Excuse me," the mage said once he reached them, "are you the Inquisition?"

"We are," said Cassandra. "What business might you have with us?"

The mage took out an envelope, the paper perfumed with a familiar scent. Vivienne.

"An invitation," the mage said.

Lavellan took the envelope and gave the man a nod of clear dismissal. "Thank you."

He put the envelope down and stared at it. It was so incongruous beside the red objects from Red Jenny, which was quite symbolic of Vivienne and Sera's dynamic, and he couldn't help but smile.

He opened the envelope and read the invitation.

“Party,” he said and placed it on the table for his companions to read. “Madame de Fer.”

Varric raised a brow at him. “A noble invites you to their party, but you're happier about getting invited to an alley by a random stranger?”

“It’s not that I’m unhappy.” Lavellan hid his grimace. Vivienne was... Vivienne had a brand of cutthroat that had always made him vaguely uncomfortable. It wasn’t dislike, not exactly. More like... unease.

Still, he respected her. He’d learnt a lot from her.

Lavellan shook his head. “They’re both tonight,” he said. “But the party goes for the whole night. I’m sure we can turn up later. Fashionably so.”

“We're not exactly dressed for the occasion," said Varric.

"We're not exactly there to impress them," muttered Lavellan.

"You should still make an attempt," said Solas.

"If you want to dress up, be my guest."

"It is not merely the subject of attire. Make an effort to play along even if you dislike the company, and you may also wish to reconsider the order of your meetings. It would not do well to appear in a party right after disappearing into the alleys."

"I know what I'm doing," Lavellan said, something in him baring its teeth at the fact that *Solas* was lecturing him.

Solas' expression shuttered, gaze hardening. "Of course."

Lavellan looked away and stood. "Let's go. It's almost sundown."

They followed without another word.

Lavellan chewed on his lip as they walked, unable to stop himself from replaying the previous conversation in his head. It... likely hadn't been a lecture on Solas' end. It was probably just advice, but Lavellan had been so on edge for the entire day that he'd immediately assumed that Solas was out to pick a fight.

A voice stopped them at the gates, interrupted his thoughts.

“If I might have a moment of your time?”

They turned. Grand Enchanter Fiona smiled at them.

Lavellan rubbed his face and bit back a groan. Today was not a good day.

Lavellan dodged the fireball that a preening noble hurled at him. He watched it burn through the door with disinterest.

Today was *not* a good day.

“Just say *what*,” said a voice, which slightly uplifted today. The preening noble went down choking on his own blood.

Amidst all this excitement about seeing Sera again, he'd forgotten a crucial, important detail.

“And,” she drawled, distaste evident in her tone once she took a proper look at him, “you’re an elf. Hope you’re not... too elfy.”

Varric made a strangled sound.

Today was back to *not being fantastic, thank you*.

He knew it was because of her upbringing, knew the reasons, but knowing didn't stop it from hurting. Lavellan did his best to smile.

“You’re going to have to give me an example of what you consider elfy,” he said.

“You know. All pinched in the butts and crammed in the age of elven glory.”

“Well, butt’s not pinched. At least I hope not. Crammed in the age of elven glory? Only a healthy amount, don’t worry.”

“I don’t think your healthy and mine’re the same.”

“No,” he murmured, “probably not. You’re Red Jenny?”

The subject change perked her right up. They settled the terms of their arrangement and off she went vaulting atop the roofs with a giggle. He watched her go.

Sera was the youngest of their ragtag group, and so, he'd been somewhat protective of her and had sometimes let himself be dragged off to her pranks. Six years had matured her so he'd forgotten the vehemence of her hatred against elves when she'd been younger. In those six years, he'd come to see her like a younger sister. Another one.

That was what he missed. The late nights trading stories, giggling and cackling, pies in their faces, the messy baking.

“So that was the Friend,” said Solas and Lavellan scowled at the tone of his voice. “An elf who hates her own people. Ah, but I suppose she wouldn’t consider them her people, would she?”

Deep breaths.

“We have a party to get to,” was all he said and walked.

He ignored the crushing press of loneliness.

The looks they drew when they entered the estate gave him momentary joy, but the joy in his life seemed to have a pattern and so, of course, that joy was quick to disappear once a brat came snivelling down the steps. He spat on Lavellan and the Inquisition, the disdain evident in his eyes

behind the mask.

“They expect to be taken seriously when they hail a knife-ear as our saviour? Pig shit,” he said, leering at Lavellan.

Count back from ten.

Cassandra tensed behind him and took a step forward, eyes blazing, ready to argue, but Lavellan held her back.

“And look at their ranks!” He flourished his arms at Lavellan's companions. “A criminal, some kind of homeless elf, and a crazed Seeker? The world has gone mad!”

Lavellan smiled in a way that would make his vallaslin shift.

“Such high praises you sing for us and yet I have none for you in return,” Lavellan said and took a step forward, offered his hand. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.”

He slapped the offered hand away. “Don’t touch me, murderer!” He went for the sword on his back. “If you are a man of honour, you will answer to the crime of the Divine’s murder and step outside to face the charges!”

A snap echoed in the chamber.

The noble froze in place, covered by a thin sheet of magic and ice.

Madame de Fer had arrived.

It was admirable and fearsome how easily she destroyed the man’s — Alphonse’s — social standing by the time she'd descended the stairs. She turned to Lavellan.

“My lord, you are the wounded party in this affair. How would you like to deal with this foolish boy?”

Lavellan eyed him. “I defer to you. You know him better.”

She nodded, and destroyed not just his social standing, but also his personal dignity. He was out the salon before anybody could miss him.

“I’m so pleased you could make it, darling,” said Vivienne. Her eyes travelled over his companions. “And you’ve brought guests! I hope the salon is to their liking.”

“Could do with less people belittling us,” mumbled Varric.

Vivienne heard though. “I am shamed that my guests have had to endure such treatment. If you would like to take further actions against Marquis Alphonse, you need only ask and it shall be done.” She turned to Lavellan. “Now then, shall we talk?”

Of course he accepted her. It would be stupid not to.

He reunited with Cassandra, Varric, and Solas. The moment he returned, Cassandra shoved a plate filled with... food, he assumed, at him. They looked too pretty to be food.

“You have not eaten today. Eat,” she ordered. He took the plate, bewildered. “Today has been a long day for you.”

Lavellan hid his wince by biting into the pastry.

“All in a day’s work,” he said after he chewed. “Madame de Fer has offered her services to the Inquisition.”

Cassandra nodded. “She is certainly influential and has many connections within the Orlesian court.”

“Where to now?” asked Varric.

“She offered us rooms if we want to stay the night,” Lavellan said.

“*Do* we want to stay?” Solas asked.

Lavellan looked down at his plate. “No.”

They agreed on an inn near the docks of Val Royeaux and retreated to their rooms. Lavellan fell face first onto his bed with a groan.

His heart ached. This was new. He hadn’t felt this in a while, or at least, not this kind.

He rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

Lonely.

Orlais was not kind, certainly not to elves, and the two elves in his inner circle didn’t even consider themselves a part of the modern elves so technically, he was still alone.

Lavellan curled up. He missed his clan and his hunters even if they spent too much time talking shit about shemlens, missed the soothing rumble of the aravels as they travelled, missed the dances and the songs by the bonfire and the quiet moments where he'd whittle away while Ellana studied beside him. It was a simple, albeit laborious life, but it was home.

He was exhausted, but sleep was far from reach tonight too.

After he grew tired of counting the specks in the ceiling, he got up and left the inn, walking down to the docks. He perched himself on the parapet. The small waves lapped at the stones and swayed the boats, the moonlight coating the water's surface with silver. He retrieved the smooth stone in his pocket and considered it, then the water. His hand raised, poised to throw it away.

Lavellan paused.

He pocketed it again. He’d only end up looking for it later.

The placid night fell upon his shoulders like a lucent coat and Lavellan closed his eyes, joining the

night in its serenity. He hummed his mother's lullaby to himself. A fragment of home.

A peculiar sound approached. Wood knocking against wood.

He stopped humming and turned. Solas was there, leaning against his staff, and Lavellan's gaze fell on the new additions to it: three small blocks of wood dangling from strings. They knocked against each other when he moved the staff.

"Solas," Lavellan greeted. "What...?"

"Did the sound alarm you?" he asked.

Did he mean the wood? "No. I just thought it peculiar, is all. What are they? For your casting?"

"No. They are simply ornamental. I acquired the wood from a carpenter at the Hinterlands and procured the twine from a shop nearby." He walked closer to Lavellan, the blocks knocking.

"Should you ever hear this sound, know that it is only me and that there is no cause for alarm. Hopefully, I do not distress you as I had before."

Oh.

The guilt from earlier returned and the apology gnawed on his tongue, but he couldn't forget Solas' words on the bridge a while ago.

"Thank you," Lavellan said regardless, because it *was* still a considerate gesture. "But wouldn't it get in the way of casting?"

Solas blinked. "Oh. I... had not considered that."

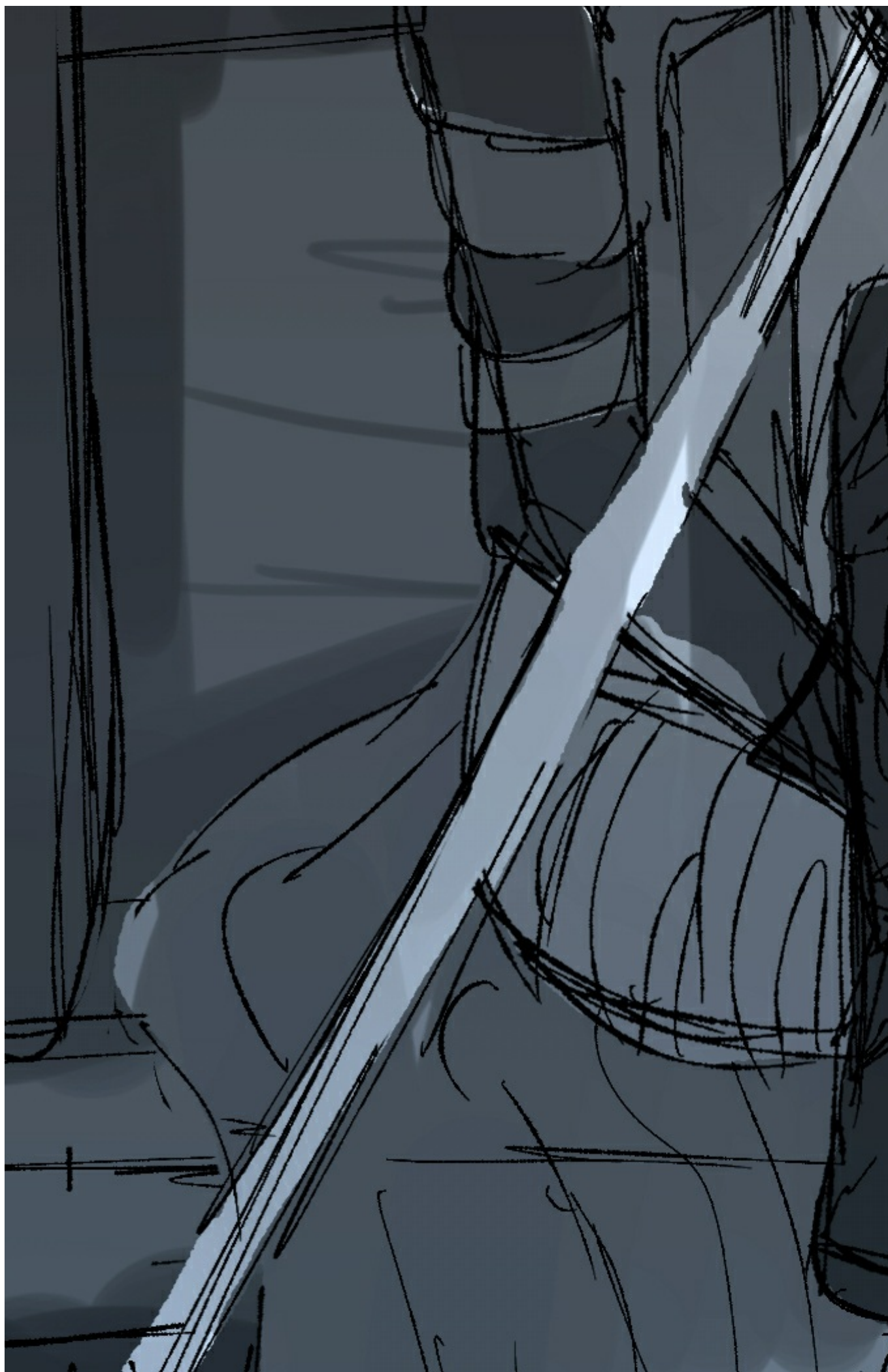
Lavellan stared at the staff in consideration, then held his hand out. "I have an idea. May I?" asked Lavellan. Solas passed the staff to him. "Do you have any twine left?"

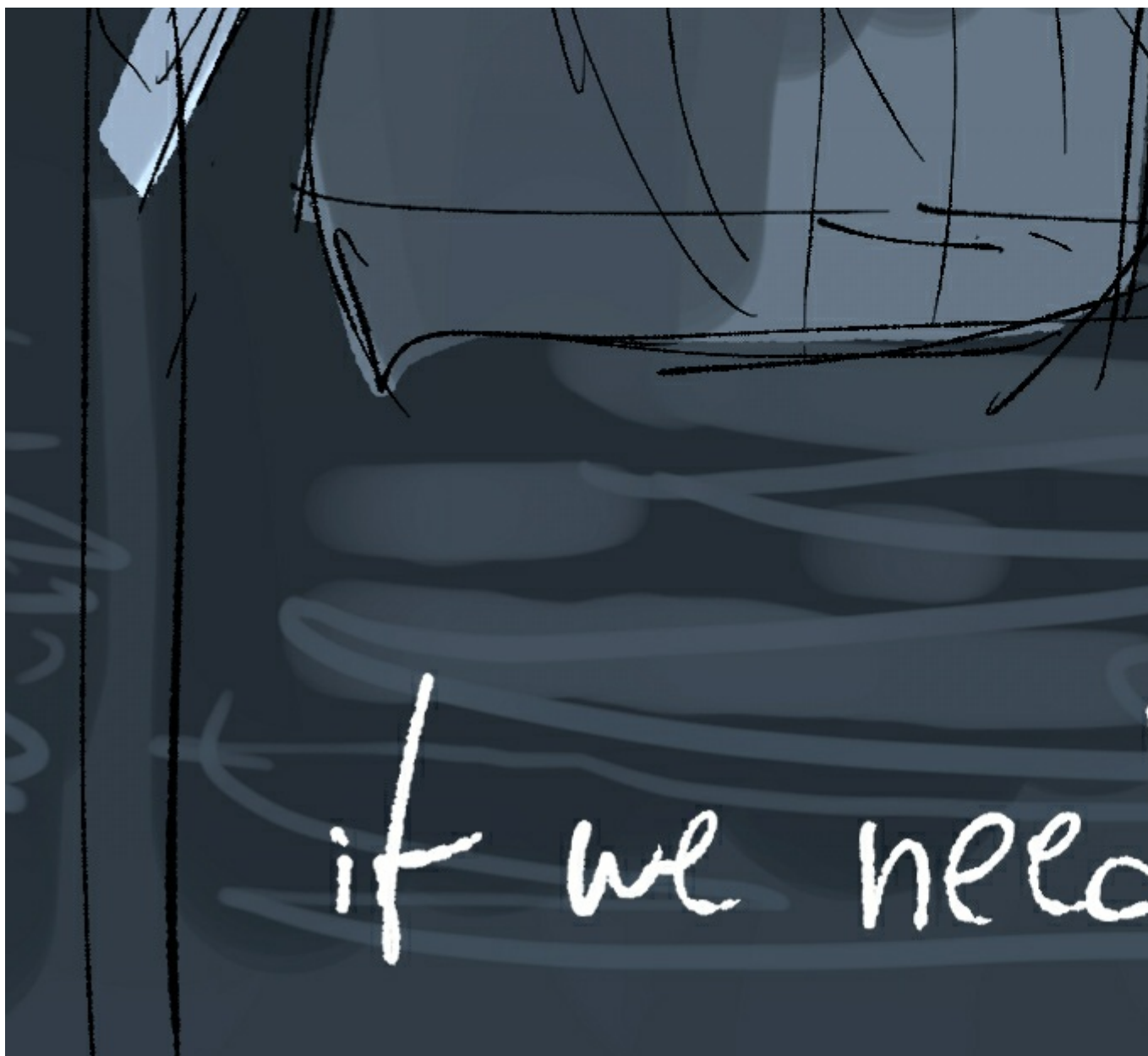
"Yes." Solas gave it and sat beside him as he worked. Lavellan secured the twine to the staff then gathered the wood and wrapped them together with the shaft, knotted it so that it was secure yet quick to remove.

"There," said Lavellan, voice softening, the knot reminding him of the simple times with his clan. "We use this knot to tie the halla to branches if we need to leave them someplace for a while. Obviously, this is much smaller but the principle is the same. I'll have to show you how to make the knot though. Do you learn by watching?"









“Yes,” he said. “And doing.”

“Alright. Here.” He demonstrated it to Solas and passed it along. Solas got it right immediately. Lavellan huffed out a soft, impressed noise. “Are you sure you don’t already know this knot?”

“I have tied knots before but not this particular one.”

Solas stood and swung his staff forcefully, but the knot remained and the blocks didn’t obstruct the casting. He pulled on the loose end and the blocks fell, knocking against each other.

“Most impressive,” he said to Lavellan.

Lavellan looked away.

He thought that was it and Solas would leave, that he just wanted to show Lavellan the wooden blocks, but Solas sat beside him once more and leaned the staff against the parapet. Lavellan’s throat seized and his heart pounded. Solas kept sending him glances, gauging his reaction. Quite possible that he was attempting to normalise his presence to Lavellan.

But Lavellan still couldn’t stop the frantic feeling that was prickling over the back of his neck. What was it? Irritation? Anger? He couldn’t tell.

"Thought you didn't like the Dalish," said Lavellan. "I'm sure you're eager to get away. You're under no obligation to stay with me."

"It is not obligation."

"Pity then? Save it. I don't want it."

Solas sighed, a touch irritated. "It is not pity, either. Why this sudden childish hostility?"

Lavellan grinded his teeth. *Childish?* The entire day, he thought Lavellan was being childish?

"Because I'm *hurt*, Solas," he snapped. Solas' eyes widened slightly. "And I'm *alone*. The one elf I met didn't like elves, and the elf accompanying me doesn't like the Dalish, and I'm surrounded by people who want to see me hang. Do you know what that feels like, Solas? Being surrounded by people, by people who look like you, and still feeling alone?"

The question was deliberate, meant to drive the point home. It worked. Solas looked away, gaze falling.

Lavellan's ire fled him in a rush, left him cold and aching.

"Ir abelas," Solas murmured.

Lavellan didn't answer and drew his knees up to his chin instead.

He thought Solas would leave for sure this time, but still, he stayed.

"Why are you still here?" he asked.

"You said you were feeling alone. Unless you wish for me to leave?"

He should have said, "Yes, go away," but the words wouldn't leave his lips. "Can you really stand my presence?" he asked instead, mildly mocking. "Do I not insult you with my existence alone?"

"It is late," said Solas, "and you look tired. Let us not give this city any more scorn and hostility to gild its walls with."

"You can't wave this away. It will come up later."

"Later. But not tonight."

The white flag hung between them, a momentary truce.

Lavellan took it. "Fine. If you really don't mind staying, then I guess we can talk about nicer things."

"What do you wish to talk about?" Solas asked.

Lavellan stared at Solas, watched how the shadows of the night softened his features, how the moonlight made his eyes gleam. He looked away with a heavy heart.

It was quiet for a few seconds, filled only by the sound of the boats creaking over the waters.

Eventually, Lavellan asked, "Do you have stories about the Fade?"

Solas smiled, genuine and soft, the kind of smile that squinted his eyes. Lavellan drew his knees

tighter to his chest and listened to the lilting tales of spirits and memories, of ruins and heroes of the past, and pretended things weren't as complicated as they were.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so apparently Vivienne's estate is actually far from Val Royeaux and not feasibly reached within the timeframe of a night but I'm electing to ignore that.

Tell me of the fragments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

woven in our faded raiments—

The advisors greeted Lavellan and Cassandra in the War Room upon their return to Haven's Chantry.

"How was the trip?" asked Cullen.

"Orlais' only redeeming quality is their food," he grumbled.

"Don't mind him," said Cassandra. "He is grumpy from his nap because he has not rested properly."

"But I'm right," he muttered and ran his hand through his hair. "In summary, the Chantry still wants nothing to do with us, we've recruited Madame de Fer and a member of Red Jenny, the Templars have abandoned the Chantry, and Grand Enchanter Fiona's willing to speak to us," he said.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat the middle?" Cullen asked, bewildered.

"We recruited—"

"No! The other middle."

"Oh. The Templars have abandoned the Chantry and the Lord Seeker is about as bad as or worse than a demon."

Cassandra sighed beside him and expanded, relayed information in a more constructive manner.

"So we've received an invitation from the mages," said Leliana and smiled. "It would be impolite to decline, no?"

"It could be a trap," said Cullen. "We've no reason to trust them."

"Nor they us," said Lavellan. "It was a gamble for the Grand Enchanter to seek us out. But I've wondered... Couldn't we get both groups?"

Leliana smiled. "You would strive to have them both? Most ambitious."

Dorian had once mentioned that he'd apprenticed for a magister who had experimented with time magic. It could be worth looking into. It might also give Lavellan an idea of just what the hell had happened to him.

"There is the problem of their... reception of one another," said Josephine, scratching away at something on her board and frowning at it. "Gathering the two opposing factions of a rebellion under one roof does not seem wise."

"Ignoring the literal hole into the Fade in the sky does not seem wise," he fired back. "Cullen's right. I'm uncomfortable with more power being poured into the mark, but we'll need the mages

after the Breach is closed. Whoever created it and murdered the Divine is still out there. If we succeed in closing the Breach, what then?" He chewed on his bottom lip. "Anyone mad enough to throw the world into chaos and expects to get away with it is mad enough to come after whoever meddles with their plans. Sealing the Breach isn't the end result; it's a halfway point."

"You're planning ahead," said Leliana.

He nodded.

"Good. You've already gotten the mages' attention, now remains getting the Templar Order's."

"We should find where they are first. Are there any unoccupied fortresses or redoubts nearby that they could retreat to?" he asked. He knew, of course, so he nudged things along.

"You're actually serious?" asked Cullen, voice rising half an octave.

"Commander, I'm *always* serious," said Lavellan. "So, how would we go about this?"

The four of them discussed how best to tackle Lavellan's suggestion and concocted a sound plan. Afterwards, Cassandra asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely not!" he chirped, but his forced cheer softened into something more genuine. "But it's worth a shot, no? We can be the fools who ended the world together." If not them, then Solas.

Not that Lavellan would allow it. Not while he still drew breath.

"Let us hope that doesn't come to pass," sighed Josephine. "Excuse me, then. I'll work on seeing whether we can use Madame Vivienne's connections within the Imperial Court to help us put pressure on the Templars."

"I'll help," said Leliana. "Our hands will certainly be full."

Cullen stared at the map for a beat before he heaved an impressive sigh. "Alright. I'll see what I can do about finding their whereabouts."

Lavellan drummed his fingers on the table. "Meanwhile, there're a few more things to do in the Hinterlands."

"Oh, before I forget," said Josephine. She put her board down with a quick, "Wait one moment," thrown over her shoulder as she left the War Room, then returned with a roll of paper tied with—

Lavellan perked up.

Tied with a cord of halla leather. She gave it to him and he beamed.

"From my clan?" he asked and she nodded with a smile.

"It arrived yesterday."

He unrolled the letter and a smaller roll of paper tucked within it fell. He caught it. There was a stylistic flame scribbled on it and his heart warmed. Ellana's. He read the bigger paper first.

"They're worried you're keeping me here against my will," he relayed. "They just want to know I'm being treated alright."

Leliana nodded. "I can send an agent to deliver the news as well as things they may need as a show

of good faith.”

He considered this and decided, “Metal. It's expensive and we rarely come across them. Also some coin. My clan sells the things we make when we pass by towns and cities. It would be good for them to have the means to buy materials.”

“Very well,” she said.

“Oh and wait a bit. I want to send a letter back.”

They went over a few more issues and discussed how best to address them before they were left to their own devices.

He opened the Chantry doors to step foot outside and instead came face to face with the startled expression of one Cremisius Acclasi. Lavellan almost dropped his letter in alarm.

The Chargers were in a dismal mood. Krem gripped his glass so hard that it cracked.

Despite this, his voice was flat when he asked, “Did he say anything else? Anything at all? About us?”

Lavellan looked away, sore. Dorian had finally fallen asleep after emptying himself of all his fury, but he hadn't cried. Couldn't. It'd pissed him off even more until he'd worn himself out.

“No,” he murmured.

Krem scoffed, the sound laced with hurt. “Yeah. Guess we weren't actually that important to him, huh? I'm an idiot.”

Krem cleared his throat and brought Lavellan back into the present with a sinking feeling in his chest. After Bull's betrayal, the Chargers had continued their fight with Krem leading them but... none of them had been the same since.

“Excuse me, I have a message for the Inquisition but I'm having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me.” He blinked at Lavellan. “Oh! You're the Herald. Well, looks like my luck's turned around.”

“Hello,” he greeted, throat dry. “What's the message?”

“I'm Cremisius Acclasi,” he said. “I'm part of a mercenary group called the Bull's Chargers. We do work mostly in Orlais and Navarra. We received word that a group of Tevinter Mercenaries are gathered at the Storm Coast. My company commander, Iron Bull, offers this information free of charge. Thought we'd give them a warm welcome to the South in four days' time. If you'd like, come see us in action. We're the best you'll find.”

Lavellan mulled it over. Four days? “How long does it take to travel to the Coast again...?” he murmured to himself.

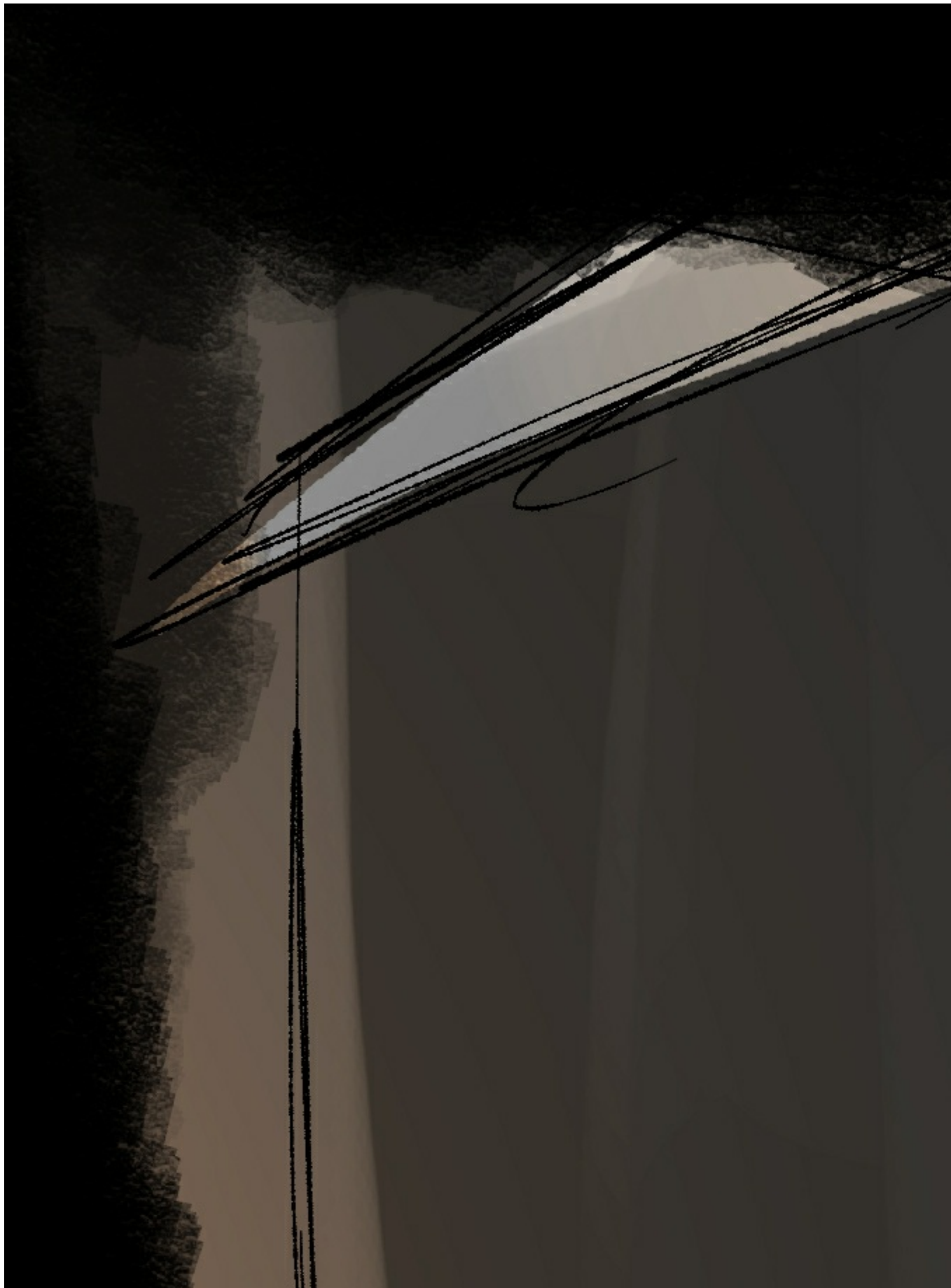
Krem answered anyway. “About a day if you plan to take a coach or a carriage. Maybe faster with your own horses.”

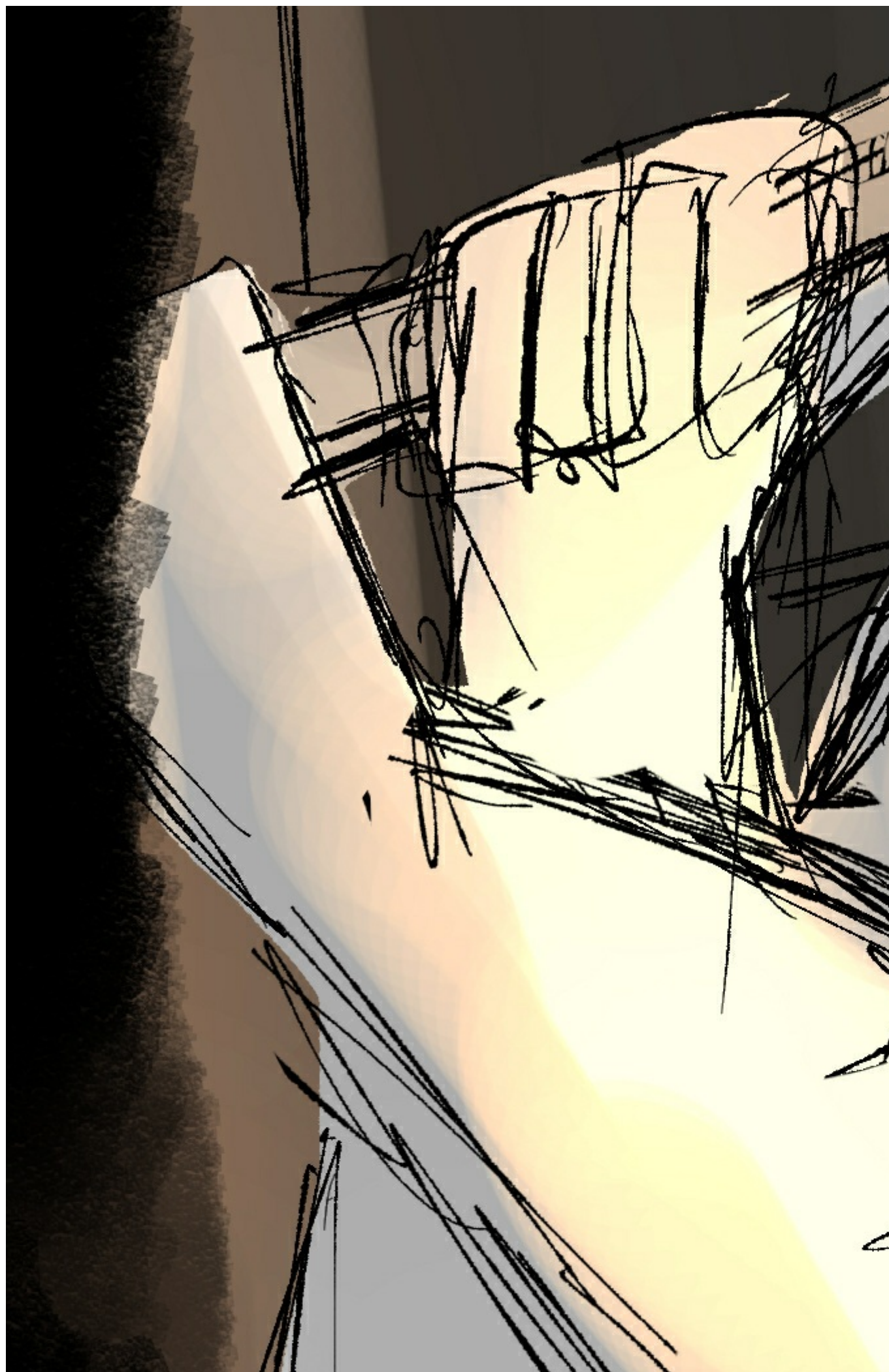
So he could give his companions today and tomorrow to rest, then set out overmorrow. He would have to ask Cullen how many horses they could spare. Otherwise, carriage again. Maybe he could shove Cassandra in with Solas and Lavellan could take the horse while Varric sat with the driver again. He didn't want to put Sera and Solas together just yet. Or Solas with Vivienne. Lest the

ground grow icicles from those two's chilly disagreements. Vivienne wasn't here yet though, so he had some time.

Still, the thought of seeing Bull again...

"Nothing personal, bas."









Two betrayals in one week was not how Lavellan had expected that Exalted Council would go.

“Alright,” he said.

“Really?” Krem asked. “Oh, uh, I was expecting to do a lot more convincing.”

Lavellan smiled at him. “We need all the help we can get.” And because he was a masochist apparently, he said, “Tell me about your company commander.”

They way Krem’s eyes lit up with equal parts respect and fondness only served to remind him of the dead-eyed Krem in the past. Bull wasn’t just a boss to them. Bull was their world, the man who they would do anything for because he would do the same in return. At least, that was what they’d thought.

In the end, Bull had chosen his duty to the Qun over his friends.

“He’s Qunari. Those big guys with the horns. Pays well, fights well, leads from the front, and he’s smart about how he does things. He’s professional and treats us equally. But this has to be the first time he’s gone out of his way to pick a side.”

Lavellan tasted the scent of gaatlok at the back of his throat.

“Is that a good sign?” he asked.

“I think so. Must think what you’re doing’s worth putting weight behind.” Krem took that moment to watch the nearby medical tent. Refugees, the injured, and the faithful poured in through the gates with every passing hour. The increasing numbers placed more weight over Lavellan’s lungs. Was there a way to avoid burying Haven under an avalanche? “And I’m inclined to agree. If you’ll

let us, we'd like to be a part of that"

"Alright, Acclasi," he said. "We'll come up in four days' time."

He nodded and grinned at Lavellan. "See you then, Herald.

Lavellan watched him go before he retreated to his cabin and read Ellana's letter to distract himself from the unearthed memories. It had been three years since that incident at the Darvaarad...

He shook himself out of it and opened the letter.

Hanon,

*I still can't wrap my mind around what you've told me, but judging by recent events,
I'd be an even bigger fool than you to ignore it.*

*I've begun looking into the legends of Fen'Harel to see if I can gain insight from them
(and I think I'm worrying the Keeper with all my questions about him). We may be far
apart, but I'll do what I can to help.*

*Aenoreir was appointed the new Warleader. He's got a big head but I think he does
miss you. A little. I can't tell.*

*Be careful. Maybe you can use your knowledge of the future to sway or mislead
Fen'Harel.*

Safe travels. Stay alive.

Ellana.

Information on Fen'Harel? Lavellan looked out the window towards the direction of Solas' cabin. Solas already had his agents but Lavellan wasn't sure who among them were already within the Inquisition. He recalled a few faces but he couldn't be sure. Still, he should be careful about his correspondences with Ellana.

Lana,

The wolf has large ears and eyes. Watch for the bramble patch.

Hanon.

Unexpected things lurked amidst the bramble so one must pay attention. It was a warning he'd used with his hunters.

Lavellan tied the halla leather cord around his letter and left the cabin to find Leliana. She was in her large tent just outside the Chantry, talking to a scout.

"—kill him. Make it clean, painless if you can. We were friends, once."

Memories of the Grand Cathedral's tense atmosphere returned. Divine Victoria had been swift with her judgements, steel in her heart, her hand, and her words. Lavellan and Victoria had vied to change things for their version of 'better' even as they'd succumbed to their rage and despair and shadows. Sometimes, when they'd looked at each other, they'd see their reflection — someone who was lost and only fighting because it was all they knew. All they had left.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, though it sounded more like a demand.

“He’s killed one of my best agents,” she argued. “And knows the location of the others. The longer I leave him alive, the more I shorten the lives of the rest. I condemn one man to save dozens. He must die.”

Lavellan stood his ground. “Must he?”

Leliana straightened her back and frowned. “Sometimes we must do things that are needed even if we do not enjoy it.”

“And how long before doing what’s right and what’s needed blur?”

She shook her head, frown deepening. “I cannot afford the luxury of ideals at a time like this.”

“This is exactly the time for ideals.” They were drawing a few looks. Lavellan eased the argumentativeness away from his tone and forced himself to relax. “The world is a dark enough place, Leliana. It needs ideals at a time like this.”

The scout in the tent with them shuffled in discomfort.

Leliana gave him another of her calculating looks and he worried for a moment that he’d overstepped, but her face softened and she huffed.

“You feel very strongly about this,” she said. She paced the tent and leaned over her table, studying the papers scattered about it. “Very well.” She turned to her agent. “Apprehend Butler but see to it that he lives. I’ll find another way to deal with him.” She redirected her attention to Lavellan. “There. Is there anything else?”

Lavellan cleared his throat. “Yes, actually.” He handed her his letter. “Would it be alright if your agent could also deliver this letter to my clan? To the Keeper’s First, specifically. And, this is important, make sure it’s delivered by your agent and not a raven.” Solas had agents who could shapeshift. They’d posed as Leliana’s messenger ravens and either spied on them, intercepted messages, read the messages, or all of the above. He wasn’t sure what the extent of or how active Solas’ spy network was currently but better safe than sorry.

She accepted the letter. If she thought the request peculiar, she didn’t say.

“Of course. I’ll see to it,” she said. “Oh, and before you go, I also have a request. There have been no traces of the Grey Wardens lately and it has me worried. However, we’ve heard of rumours that there is one in the Hinterlands. He goes by the name of Warden Blackwall.”

Ah. Lavellan nodded. “You want me to find him when we make the trip?”

“If he is there.”

“Not a problem. I’ll see you around then.” He bowed and left, hadn’t realised his hands were shaky, and he almost laughed. Leliana was not an easy person to argue with. He almost preferred yelling at Solas. Almost.

Lavellan walked back to his cabin but stopped when he saw who just entered the gates.

Sera walked seemingly without a care for the strange looks thrown her way, marching with nothing but a pack and her bow and arrows slung over her back. But he could still tell that she was uncomfortable with the stares.

He waved and got her attention and her face lit up in recognition. She rushed up the stairs, slightly

out of breath.

“Hey chosen one!” she greeted and bounced on the balls of her feet. She looked up at him and squinted. “Piss, I keep forgetting how tall you are.”

“I’m pretty average compared to the humans around here. There goes my poor, fragile, crushed ego.” Others stared openly now. Sera shifted, mouth pursing. “Hey, you hungry?” he asked to distract her.

She patted her stomach. “Starving.”

“There’s a tavern nearby. Food’s good.”

Her expression brightened at that.

“So this is it, huh?” she asked once she’d devoured all her food. He raised a brow, braced himself for her joke. “It’s fine, yeah? Just... I thought it’d be bigger.” She giggled. “Get it?”

Despite himself, he still snorted and smiled.

“It’s how it’s used, Sera. Not the size.”

Her *ewws* were interspersed with chortles and snorts.

Lavellan shrugged, a picture of innocence. “I don’t know what’s so funny. I’m talking about the Inquisition.”

Sera grinned at him. “Here you are looking half a snit away from being framed on a wall but you’re actually a tit and a bit under all that, yeah?”

And he still didn’t know what to do when she wasn’t making any sense. In the past, all he had to say was, “Come off it, twat,” and she would re-explain herself with a half-baked but fond insult thrown his way. He couldn’t exactly say that now. She’d choke him with the string of her bow or save herself the energy and just shove an arrow into his balls.

She picked up on his confusion. “I meant, like... You look like you’d be in one of those paintings those puffed up nobles have around their house. All serious and stuffy. But you’re alright.”

“Thanks. And you look like you’d be the asshat who steals all those paintings.”

“Not like they need it. One of those shiny frames would feed four families for a week. ‘Sides, those big paintings usually hide a vault inside. That, or something right creepy.” She leaned back and patted her belly. Maryden changed her song to something cheery in the background. “Can’t do that lately though. All this fighting’s screwing up with the normal and now they’re not normal. Need it to be normal to get sovereigns flowing again. Another reason why the Templars and mages need to be sat down from their hissy fits.”

“Most people pick a side.”

“Most people are stupid. Those people are stupid. They’re busy punchin’ each other and whinging and they’re forgetting about the giant, green hole in the sky. And they’ve already screwed a whole

lot of shite up even before the giant green hole.” She pulled a face. “I tried shooting at it you know? It doesn’t come down. That’s *weird*.”

“You shot an arrow at the Breach?” he asked.

“Well, yeah. Worth a shot, right?” She sniggered at her pun. “Still, they need to be sat down!”

“Sure, that sounds easy. I think we can manage that,” he said and grinned. “End the war, close the giant hole in the sky.”

She stared at him.

“The easy one first,” he amended.

“Which is?”

“Fixing the sky, obviously.”

Sera dissolved into another fit of giggles. He’d missed her laughter. Its infectious quality had held his dark moods at bay during terrible days. It had also made him increasingly worried, had him wondering what she’d done this time and how big of a headache it would give him and Josephine. Or how loud Josephine would yell at him.

“You *are* such a tit and a bit. A daft one too,” she said and leaned forward with a wide smile.

“Most people get special, lose their snerk. Maybe I’ll like you, chosen one.”

“Maybe you already do.” He waved his fingers at her. “I’ve been told I’m charming.”

Sera scoffed and leaned back, but the corner of her lips were still pulled in a half-smile. “By who? Boring old farts?”

“You wound me, Sera.”

Chapter End Notes

In Lavellan's past life, the Qunari never reached out for an alliance so Bull's personal quest never happened. So come Trespasser, Chargers are alive, Bull not so much.

The dreams are unkind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

beasts roam man's mind—

The cold morning air fogged his breath. Lavellan nocked an arrow, eyes on the two rams. Hunting had always been one of the things that relaxed him, that refreshed his mind.

He drew. Four breaths later, both rams were down with an arrow through their ribs. He slung his bow over his back and whistled. A horse trotted to him, dragging a large tray, and he offloaded the two rams onto it. More food for Haven's growing inhabitants. There were already four rabbits hanging on his waist so he placed them on the tray too.

He rode back to Haven with his haul and passed it on to the kitchen hands. Meat for food, pelt for armour.

The clang of metal caught his attention and he turned his head, found the new recruits training under Commander Cullen's supervision. Cullen saw him watching and nodded in greeting. Lavellan nodded back and approached.

"Hera— Mahanon," said Cullen, hastily correcting himself.

"Commander Cullen," Lavellan returned.

"Bit early for hunting. The sun's barely risen."

He shrugged. Couldn't sleep again. "I missed it," he said instead. "How are your recruits shaping up?"

Cullen observed them for a while, then cracked a wry smile. "Miraculously better now that you've arrived."

"Ah. Should I come more often?"

He chuckled. "Perhaps they'll finally learn how to *use the shield in your hand! Block with it!*" he lectured at a soldier, and sighed. "We've been getting more recruits, eager to join the cause. None made quite the entrance you did."

"It's a talent of mine," he said wryly. "I'm quite skilled at falling out of skies and being in the wrong place at the right time."

"I, for one, am glad you were. Maker, we would be a giant mess otherwise."

"Give yourself some credit. You're doing well given your limited resources." *And withdrawal struggles.* Lavellan scrutinised him. Cullen was pale, and there were shadows beneath his eyes. "Are you doing alright?" he couldn't help but ask.

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck. "Been busy. We've narrowed down the places where the Templars could have regrouped at. We'll arrive at a conclusion soon."

"You know that's not what I meant."

Steel resounded as the soldiers sparred.

“A few nightmares,” Cullen admitted with a murmur. “It’s fine.”

“How much sleep do you normally get?”

“I assume as much as you. Perhaps more depending on the night.”

Lavellan laughed but it sounded weak, even to him. “Are you implying I look like shit, Commander?”

“You look as you normally do.” Translation: *you’ve always looked like shit. In conclusion, you’ve barely slept even before we’d met.* And Cullen wouldn’t be wrong. A good night’s sleep was as foreign to Lavellan as humility was to Corypheus. “You are awake when I’m awake. And I find myself often awake.”

“It’s an elven thing,” he lied.

Cullen didn’t even look at him. “No it’s not.”

“A Dalish thing then.”

Cullen uncrossed his arms. “Have you tried visiting the apothecary for some sleeping elixirs?”

“Have you?”

“They didn’t work.” He quickly signed a paper presented to him by a scout. “But that was me. You could try, especially since you’re headed to the Coast tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Lavellan mumbled and fiddled with his gloves. Meeting Bull again while sleep-deprived may just be his undoing. “Do you think we can spare four mounts for tomorrow? After the Coast, we’re riding down to the Hinterlands. I thought it might be easier if we had our own horses.”

Cullen turned his attention towards the stables. “The forward scouts have taken most of the horses with them. I suppose four horses wouldn’t hurt though.”

Lavellan paused. “We wouldn’t happen to have a small horse, would we? Preferably one for a dwarf...?”

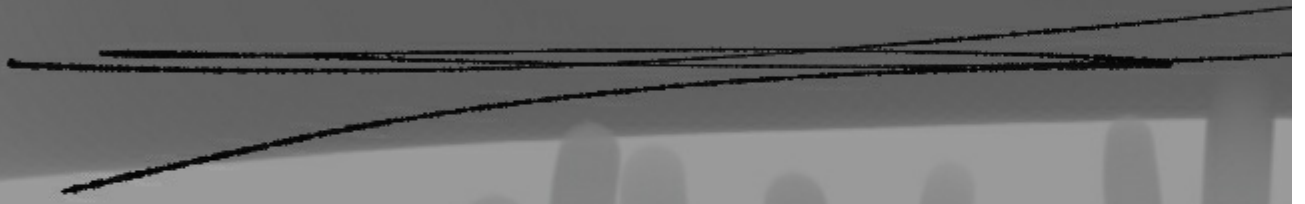
“I doubt it.”

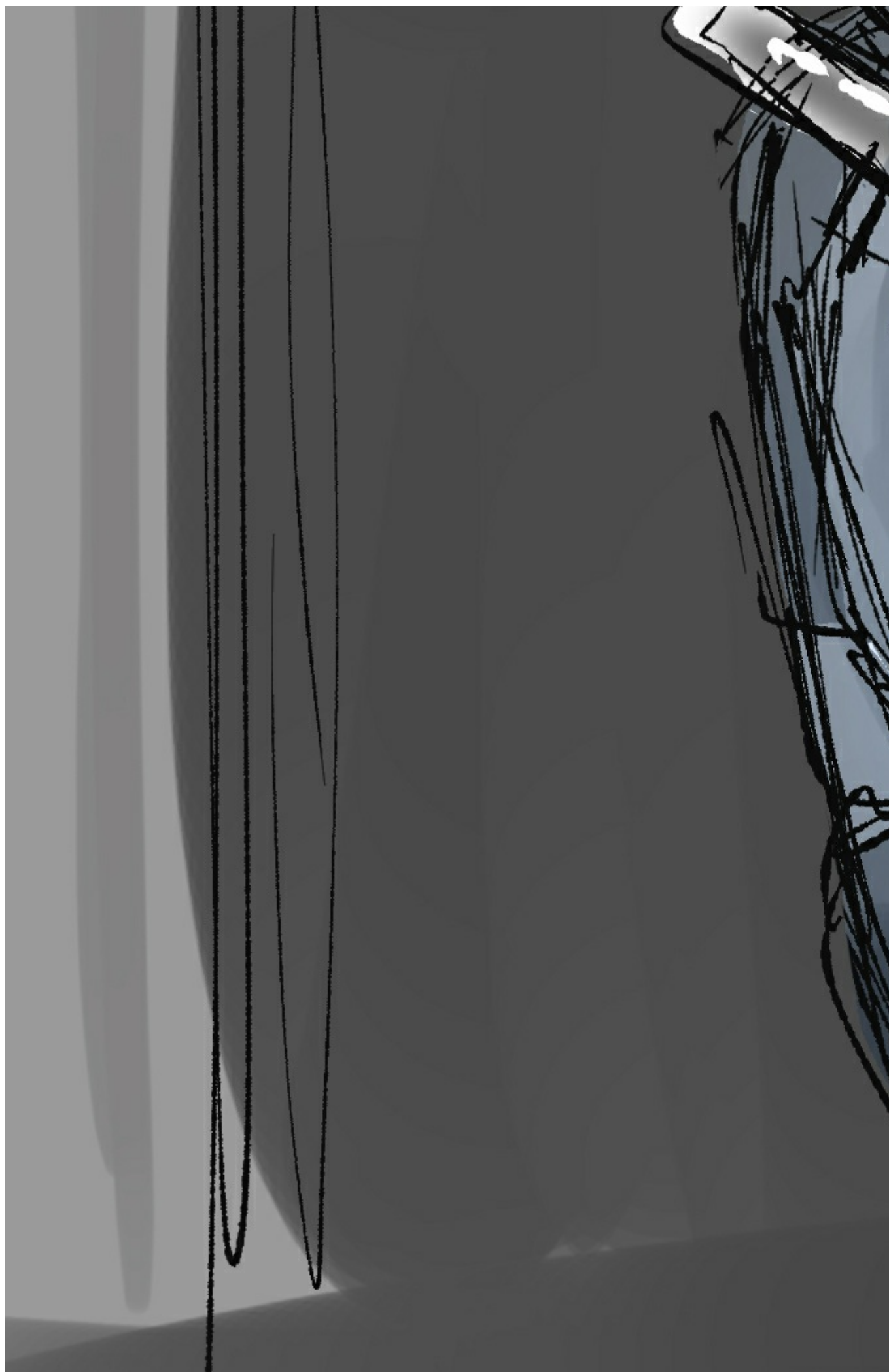
Well, stuck in a carriage again it was.

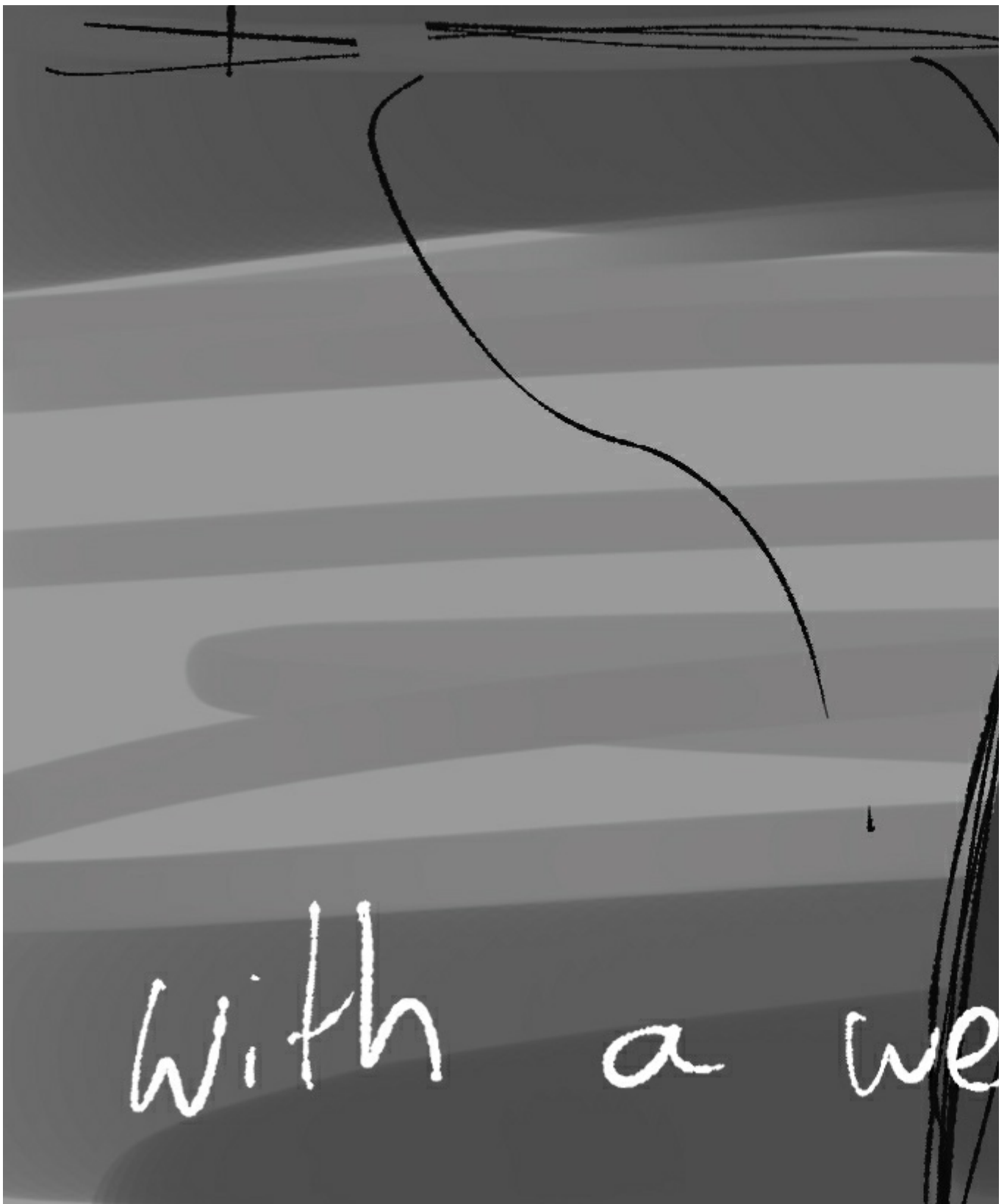
Lavellan walked out of Apothecary Adan’s cabin with a week’s worth of sleeping elixirs. He wasn’t sure if they would work but he needed to be rested and alert for the following events to come.



LaVellan







He chewed on his lip. Obtaining help from both the mages and the Templars was a tall order, and he wasn't sure how it would even work. And after that... Corypheus had attacked them with the Venatori and the mages. Lavellan had already begun inspecting the trebuchet within Haven and searched for the opening of the cavern he'd miraculously fallen into. He'd almost died on the mountains because he'd fallen unconscious after falling in. If he knew where it was and retreated deliberately into it this time *without* knocking himself out, it may lessen the distance between him and the others.

Or he could fail and die for real and wake up to do it all over again.

He also had to find a way to evacuate everyone at Haven beforehand. How would that work? Come up with some excuse like, “Yes, evacuate everyone in case the Breach blows and kills us all when I try to close it.”

But then, would that interfere with their finding of Skyhold? Corypheus could still find them (he had a fucking *dragon*) and then they would be vulnerable out in the open.

Lavellan mussed his hair in frustration and pulled on it while muttering a string of rapid elven curses. Why was this so hard?

Wood knocked behind him.

Solas.

He turned. Solas walked towards him, the wooden blocks on his staff swaying.

“Hello,” Lavellan greeted.

“Good morning,” he returned. “You were deep in thought and I did not want to startle you.”

“I wasn’t. Startled, I mean.”

“Good.” He leaned his staff against the wall of his cabin and stood beside Lavellan, hands clasped behind his back, eyes trained at the sky. “The Senior Enchanter arrived earlier,” he said, serene expression pulling tight into something attempting to be polite. “She is... opinionated.”

Oh dear. “You’ve spoken already?”

“Words were not needed. She caught sight of me, and with one sweep of her gaze, made her distaste of me quite known.” Solas smiled. “I am surprised she had enough self-restraint to walk away without dragging me by the neck to a Circle.”

“I won’t let her.”

Solas turned to him then, head cocked to one side with a small frown, puzzling out something he thought fascinating. Lavellan avoided eye contact. The expression was so familiar and yet so distant, a portrait laying dusty and cobwebbed in a corner, colours faded, paint cracked. It belonged to the simpler times.

“And how would you stop her when she could easily coat you within ice?” he asked.

“We have an ex-Templar,” Lavellan offered.

“Is that supposed to make me, an apostate, feel better?”

Lavellan scrunched his face. Fair point. “Then I’ll drive Enchanter Vivienne back with terrible outfits. Perhaps one made of plaideweave...” She and Dorian had made the most appalled and distraught expression when he’d jokingly presented them the gaudy, yellow fabric for their armour. Sera, being Sera, had then chosen the fabric for her pants and had paraded in front of them as much as she could. The next week, all of the plaideweave in Skyhold had been mysteriously dyed black.

They never found out who’d done it.

They also never figured out how Sera seemingly had an infinite supply of plaideweave pants.

“Ah, yes. That should suffice,” said Solas. “Truly, you are the voice of reason.”

Lavellan laughed.

He stared at the sleeping elixir, translucent and blue, and drank. Lavellan lay down and stared at the ceiling, contemplated the countless ways he could change things and how. For now, Corypheus was the dominant threat, but Solas...

He had no idea what to do about Solas.

"If I live... I'm coming to stop you." Brave words, but Lavellan couldn't see past his tears from the pain. At that point, he wasn't sure which pain was the greatest. The pain in his hand or his heart?

Solas took his hand, gentle, and placed a soft kiss upon his lips. "I know, my love," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I will never forget you."

Lavellan clutched at his chest. No. Not those. He curled up on his side and tucked his left hand close to him as if he could disappear if he shrunk into himself hard enough.

His eyes closed.

It was a lake on the edge of the world.

The willows woke, warred, wept, and wilted. Over and over. He reached for a leaf, golden and ephemeral, turned eternal in his hand, but it rusted and fell in the waters.

The water reddened. Thickened. Viscous as it slithered up his legs in slabs, pinned him in place, and he gasped, tore the sludge off. But it only spread from his fingers. An unwanted growth. The red sludge formed hands, slick, sick, and sticking. They reached his neck, forced themselves into his mouth. He choked and struggled. They were over his head, plugging his nose, closing in on his eyes.

A black wolf stared from above a willow branch.

He reached.

His vision darkened—

Lavellan awoke and something thick clogged his throat, stopped his breath, and he thrashed, tangled himself in sludge, get it off *get it off—!*

He fell off the bed and knocked his head against the floorboards.

Lavellan panted, his sweat cooling on his skin, and he flinched away from a strip of sunlight slipping in through the window and shining in his eye. He sat up. His heart pounded in his ears but there was no red sludge overtaking him. The only thing sticking to him was his tunic because of his sweat.

He'd made a right mess of the bed though. Lavellan buried his face in his hands and took a moment to regain his bearings, then he got up, armoured himself, and grabbed his bow on the way out.

His hands shook the entire time.

It was just past sunrise. Most of Haven was still asleep except for the ravens flying in and out at regular intervals. Leliana was working hard.

Steel rang against steel in the distance. Cullen's recruits and Harritt were up too, it seemed.

Lavellan retreated to the snowy fields just across the frozen river opposite Haven and came back an hour or so later with a fresh haul of rabbits. Cullen squinted at him as he passed and Lavellan threw his head back dramatically to sigh.

"Yes, mother, I tried an elixir," he said.

"And?"

"And I had an unnerving dream. Ergo, I will never drink it ever again."

"Try again," he urged. "At least three nights."

"Don't worry, I have experience with subsisting on minimal amounts of sleep. And see? I function alright." He raised the three rabbits. "Hunted just fine."

"Rabbits aren't coming at you with swords."

"I'd like to see that. They'd be so cute that I think I may just let them have a go at me."

Cullen shook his head, muttering, "Maker's breath," under his, well, breath. Lavellan grinned and dashed before Cullen could use Lavellan's previous comment as ammunition that he'd gone stupid from sleep-deprivation. He hadn't. He was fine.

Lavellan delivered the rabbits to the kitchens and readied himself for the journey to the Storm Coast.

He woke Varric up and asked him to get Solas because Lavellan was a coward, then looked for Cassandra. She was fully geared when he found her.

"Are we leaving?" she asked.

"We are. Good morning." His gaze fell on the small rucksack in her hand. "What's that?"

She opened the flap and revealed the translucent blue of the sleeping elixirs. "The Commander asked me to bring them."

"Oh, for—" Lavellan rubbed his face. "Alright, let's go."

"He is only worried about you. As am I."

"Because I'm the only one who can seal rifts, yes, I know. I need to take care of myself. Don't

worry, I am.”

Cassandra scowled. “Yes, but we are also worried because a great deal of responsibility and burden has suddenly been thrust upon you. You may be the Herald, but you are not a mere legend who needs no rest and no food. Look after yourself. For your sake too.”

He shuffled his feet, shame burning the tips of his ears and wringing his stomach. Cassandra offered the rucksack and he took it with a mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Come,” she said. “Let us meet this mercenary group.”

His stomach wrung itself for an entirely different reason.

“One moment,” he said. “You go on ahead. Varric’s waiting by the gates with Solas. I’ll be right with you.”

Cassandra nodded and walked off while Lavellan sought Sera out in the tavern. She was outside, pacing and tapping her feet.

“Hey chosen one,” she greeted at his approach. “What’s with all this shifting? Heard you’re leaving.”

“Briefly. Going to meet some giant Qunari guy and his mercenary group.”

“Qunari? Those massive ones with the horns and the stuff?”

“Yeah.”

She laughed to herself, a little dreamy. “I wonder what their women are like.”

Lavellan smiled. “Sera? Focus.”

She cleared her throat. “Right. Focused. I’ve got my focus, it’s all in there, what’s up? You need an extra hitter? ‘Cause staying here’s got me all itchy like I have a worm down my pants wrecking up something right fierce.”

He took a moment to deconstruct that sentence. “Uh, no. But I do need you to go somewhere.”

“Oh yeah? Need something to go missing?” she asked.

“More like something found. Someone. There’s a Warden in the Hinterlands apparently. Name’s Blackwall. Leliana could give you the details, but I need you to go find him. After the Coast, we’ll ride back down to the Hinterlands and meet you there.” Sera and Blackwall had formed the unlikeliest friendship. Nobody had understood it, least of all those two, but they’d run with it, had shattered any beliefs Lavellan had had about Blackwall being a responsible adult figure.

Sera looked down in consideration. “Sure, I suppose. What do I say to him?”

“That the Inquisition needs to speak to him. I feel like you can be persuasive.”

“That all? Find some Warden guy, tell him to speak to you?” she asked.

“And check on the refugees too. See how they’re faring and help in any way you can.”

That had her a little more agreeable. “Yeah, sure. I’ll get my stuff. See you then?”

Lavellan bid her farewell and rejoined Cassandra, Varric, and Solas, all waiting beside a carriage and a horse. Varric stared at him when he came over.

“Everything alright?” he asked Varric.

“I should be asking you that, Glowy.”

Lavellan waved a hand. “Just fine.”

“You have bruises under your eyes. Not entirely sure that counts as just fine.”

“They really bring out their colour.” Lavellan moved towards the horse. “I’m taking the horse this time. I want to see scenery other than snow. Is that alright?”

“Tactfully handled,” sighed Cassandra. “Yes, you may take the horse.”

“Too claustrophobic in there so I’m sitting beside the driver again,” said Varric. “This one’s called Wickham. He’s got a load of good stories, I can feel it.”

“Thank you, ser,” said Wickham.

“No, no, thank *you*.”

And so, Cassandra and Solas rode in the carriage while Lavellan rode on horseback. Wickham did have good stories, Varric was right. Lavellan found himself laughing for most of the ride and it took his mind off of meeting a certain Qunari for a while. Varric also told stories, each grander than the last.

They cleared the snow and took the Imperial Highway with intermittent stops to take a break, then stayed at an inn for a night and continued at daybreak.

Soon, the smell of saltwater permeated the humid air while seabirds called each other in the skies.

Scout Harding welcomed them and updated them on the current situation. The Chargers weren’t here yet, but the Inquisition forces had sighted the Tevinter mercenary group and had stayed back, unwilling to risk more scouts since a few of theirs had already gone missing.

He frowned. “Scouts are missing?”

“They were supposed to meet at a rendezvous point, but they haven’t come back. I’d go look myself but we don’t have many people stationed here and most of us are keeping an eye on the mercenaries.”

Lavellan nodded. “Do you have a map of where this rendezvous point is?”

After going over the map, they went in search of the scouts. He’d forgotten how much he hated the Coast.

“Slopes,” grumbled Varric behind him and he was inclined to agree. Ha. Incline.

The rendezvous point had a small group of hostile parties outside and they found their scouts dead. It was a simple, if somewhat personal fight. After one of the Mabaris rammed into Cassandra’s side, Lavellan fussed over her relentlessly and only relaxed when Solas confirmed that she was alright and nothing was broken.

“It’s fine,” Cassandra said for the fiftieth time after his fiftieth nag while he looked for the

instructions on how to make Mercy's Crest.

Lavellan scowled. "You say that but you'd probably try to walk off an arrow in your neck."

Solas looked on with a faint tug to his lips. "I did confirm that she will be alright. Her ribs will bruise but they are not broken."

"Not everything has to break first before they're considered not alright."

"A sound advice," Solas said. "Have you considered listening to it?"

"Thank you!" said Cassandra.

Lavellan grumbled beneath his breath. Once he found the instructions and materials required, he walked back to camp to requisition it.

They halted on the way back, stopped by the sounds of fighting, and Lavellan's blood fled his face. When they rushed ahead, there amidst the chaos of two mercenary groups tangled in a skirmish, was the face of an old, dead friend.

Chapter End Notes

Sera my dear you are so difficult to write

The ghosts of present future

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

howl beyond the stupor—

Breathe.

Steel on steel, sparks from the friction, fire, gaatlok, the Darvaarad.

“Nothing personal, bas.”

Bullshit, bullshit, how could this not be personal? What a laugh and a half. Lavellan was a fool — a trusting, stupid, unlearning fool.

They stayed out of the fight and watched. Cassandra gave him a querying look for his inaction and took a step forward. Lavellan’s hand shot out and held her back before he could think better of it.

He wracked his mind for an excuse. “It’s chaos out there,” he said, “and you’re injured. Besides, take this as an opportunity to assess their skills. See if they’ll be a good fit for the Inquisition.” It was a marvel that he finished the sentence without throwing up what little contents his stomach held.

That pacified Cassandra. Somewhat.

The Iron Bull swung his axe, a terrible whirlwind of steel and blood, and grinned. Lavellan held himself tight and looked away, reining in his breaths and trying not to let it race.

Wood knocked against wood beside his ear.

“Breathe,” Solas whispered, low enough that only Lavellan could hear. It was hilarious. Truly hysterical. The one who’d betrayed him was trying to stop him from breaking down at the sight of the other one who’d betrayed him. Lavellan would laugh if he wasn’t busy catching his breath. Instead, he reached for the stone in his pocket, becoming familiarised to its shape and texture due to how much he’d been seeking it.

One of the mercenaries got it in their head to try and attack Lavellan’s group.

Poor sod didn’t get far. Solas coated them in ice.

Lavellan stared at him.

“You created a powerful organisation. As such, it suffers an inevitable fate: betrayal and corruption.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?” Solas tilted his head. “Perhaps we should ask your friend, The Iron Bull. Tell me, where is he?”

Lavellan wanted to throw up.

The Chargers made quick work of the mercenary group and it was over far too quick. The Iron Bull gave his men a few orders then caught Lavellan's eye and tipped his head in acknowledgement, signalling Lavellan over.

He gripped the stone tighter and steeled himself.

"Cassandra?" he asked because he wasn't sure if he could do it alone.

"I believe he is calling *you*."

"Us. You founded the Inquisition. He wants in on the Inquisition, he talks to an important member."

"You are important too."

"Who, me? I'm just here to stop demons from tearing up the place." He dug his nails into the stone. Before Cassandra could argue, he met up with Bull.

Bull smiled at their arrival. "So you're with the Inquisition? Glad you could make it," he greeted.

"You are the Iron Bull, I presume?" asked Cassandra.

"Horns give it away?"

She chuckled. "And the height."

Bull glanced at Lavellan, noticed he'd been silent. "And you're the Herald." It wasn't a question.

Lavellan swallowed, forced himself to meet Bull's gaze. "What gave it away?"

"Heard some rumours. I made an educated guess." He shrugged and offered an amicable smile. It would've been comforting on any other occasion.

Lavellan didn't feel comforted.

"Why don't we sit down, have some drinks?" asked Bull. "Talk over the terms and whether you're willing to take us in."

"I'll have to decline the drinks," said Cassandra.

"Me too," Lavellan agreed lest he worsen the nausea.

"Alright." They sat. Lavellan searched over his shoulder for Solas and Varric. Varric was off chatting to another dwarf, but Solas was staring at Lavellan.

Lavellan tensed and turned around. A wolf lurking behind, a bull huffing and stomping in front, and nothing but a precipice on either side of him.

Cassandra and Bull discussed things back and forth. Payment, arrangements, costs versus profit, but it was all muted in Lavellan's mind and he focused on focusing instead.

"Oh, and there's one more thing. Might be useful, might piss you off."

Fenedhis, he just had to tune in to *this* part of the conversation?

"Know anything about the Ben-Hassrath?"

Cassandra frowned. “No, I don’t think so. Qunari law enforcers?”

“Yeah, that’d be it. But more along the lines of... spies.” Lavellan wanted to bury himself. “And I’m one of them.”

There was a steady moment of utter, blissful silence.

Then, “I beg your *pardon*?” demanded Cassandra and she stood. “No. I’m calling this off—”

And since Lavellan loathed himself apparently, he tugged at the tails of her coat. “No. Wait. Let’s hear what he has to say.”

Bull appraised him, a quick flick of his eye, but Lavellan knew Bull had gathered ten things about him within that short span of time. Would he realise Lavellan was two seconds away from either vomiting or throwing himself into the waters of the Waking Sea?

"Revealing yourself as a spy seems counterintuitive," said Lavellan.

“I can’t hide information like that from something called the Inquisition. It’s... literally in the name.” He nodded at the sky. “Magic like the Breach is uncontrolled and we’re not liking the sound of that. I’ve been ordered to join the Inquisition and get close to its leaders, send reports back.”

“I am waiting for the part where I do not kill you where you stand.” Cassandra’s glower could convince canyons to shut. Lavellan was glad he’d brought her.

Bull took this in stride and chuckled good-naturedly. “All right, all right. It goes two ways. I get reports from all over Orlais. I can share them with you, and if your spymaster’s worth a damn, she’ll make good use of them.”

“She?” questioned Cassandra.

“Ah, yeah. Did some research. Plus, she’s a redhead,” he sighed dreamily.

“Not helping,” muttered Cassandra. “Give us a moment.” She hauled Lavellan up and he almost tripped over his feet as she dragged him away. She gathered Solas and Varric’s attention and once they were together, she seethed, “He’s a Qunari spy!”

Varric blinked. “How’d you know?”

“He admitted it,” said Lavellan.

Varric huffed out an impressed chuckle. “I can’t tell if that’s brave or overly confident.”

“The likes of the information he revealed must have a prize,” said Solas.

“He’ll be sending reports of the Inquisition back to his superiors, the Ben-Hassrath,” Lavellan said.

“Is that everything?”

Bull was dead before they could even get any answers out of him.

“I’m sure we’re headed for a betrayal somewhere down the line,” he couldn’t help but mutter. “But for now, why don’t we enjoy his company? He seems nice.”

“Nice? A spy?” asked Cassandra, voice on the verge of rising into her furious pitch.

"Spies are people too, Seeker," said Varric. "They can be nice."

Lavellan shrugged, put more effort into making it look casual. Could Solas please stop staring at him as if he could see through Lavellan's farce?

"If I get stabbed in the back," he said, "or in this case, axed in the back, you may have bragging rights."

"I don't—" She threw her hands up. "Ugh."

"We'll get these Ben-Hassrath reports of his. They're potential connections, potential things to grow the Inquisition. The world is turned against us. We may as well accept the help of allies willing to stand with us."

Cassandra's ire eased somewhat. She shook her head. "Very well. But if Leliana or the Ambassador gives you an earful, I will not come to your rescue."

"That's okay. Maybe I'll create a bigger mess that makes them forget about it." He ran from her before she could club him over the head with her pommel and approached Bull.

Bull raised his arm in greeting. "Heya, uh... Herald? Boss?"

Lavellan tensed, every alarm he had blaring, and bit out, "No." He forced himself to calm. Not that it worked, but he entertained the thought that it did. "No. Mahanon. Or find a nickname, I don't know. Varric calls me Glowy. Cassandra calls me idiot."

Bull hummed. "Gonna need time. Nicknames need that tender, loving care, you know?" Lavellan found himself smiling at that, so small mercies, he supposed. "So? You on board with us or nah?"

"Any reports you send back have to be checked and approved by Leliana. Betray or compromise us and Cassandra will eat you alive," he warned.

Bull chuckled. "I can believe that. Wouldn't have it any other way." He called for Krem over his shoulders. "We just got hired, tell the men to finish drinking on the road."

"But we just opened up the casks! With *axes*. And you know Rocky spills half of it on me when we drink on the road. This thing can blacken grass."

Lavellan smiled. "Let them drink. They've got time. I'm going to need your help fairly soon."

"Oh yeah? What're we doing?"

"Hiring another band of mercenaries."

Lavellan wiped the blood off his daggers with a disdainful glance at the corpse of the previous Hessarian leader. The other Hessarians carted him away. To be thrown in a pit for the bears, they said. Lavellan sheathed his daggers with a heavy exhale. He had some letters to write for the families of their fallen scouts.

The Iron Bull hefted his axe over his shoulders and appraised the Hessarian camp.

“Not bad,” he said. “You definitely saved them from serving under that prick. They look fifty times more grateful.”

“If they had the discipline to not kill that fool in his sleep, then I admire their tenacity,” said Lavellan. And with that, the Blades of Hessarian and their grateful members were now agents of the Inquisition.

“Their main purport is to be a religious military arm in the name of Andraste,” said Solas. “I assume they are thrilled about serving her Herald.”

Lavellan pursed his lips and peered at Solas over his shoulders. Was he mocking him? No, that may have just been an observation.

“Not me,” said Lavellan. “The Inquisition.”

“Yes, of course. But they serve the Inquisition for you.”

Lavellan didn’t deign that with an answer. Varric joined them after descending the roof he’d used as his vantage point.

“Shit, those Mabari were almost as tall as me,” said Varric.

“Taller,” said Solas.

“Very funny, Chuckles.”

They made their way back to camp where they’d left Cassandra. She was still stormy since Lavellan had made her stay and rest. Her mood only soured further upon their return and Varric laughed quietly behind him.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“The Blades of Hessarians will gladly be agents of the Inquisition and will be our eyes and ears at the Coast,” he said and tilted his head. “You can stop sulking now.”

“I am not!”

“Not stopping or not sulking?” asked Varric.

The two bickered once more and Lavellan left them to it. The Chargers were at the Inquisition camp as well after Lavellan had offered some of their healing supplies for the injured, but there didn’t seem to be any major or fatal wounds. Now, they were just rowdy and likely already drunk. Lavellan allowed himself a soft smile at the sight, then readied some writing supplies and asked Scout Harding for the names of their missing scouts. He sat at one of the makeshift tables.

He'd written condolence letters before. They were never easy.

At one point, Cassandra and Varric joined and assisted him, their squabbling finished.

Once finished, Lavellan took a break and traversed the small pathway besides the camp to an overlook. The Waking Sea stretched forward towards the misty horizon. He hoped Ellana and the clan were alright. The first time he'd left, he'd been so worried about leaving her, especially since Ellana was a Dreamer and the thought that something might happen to her while he was away had him gnawing on his lip. He had to trust that she'd be alright.

As for him, they were finished here, and it was time to return to the Hinterlands. No messages

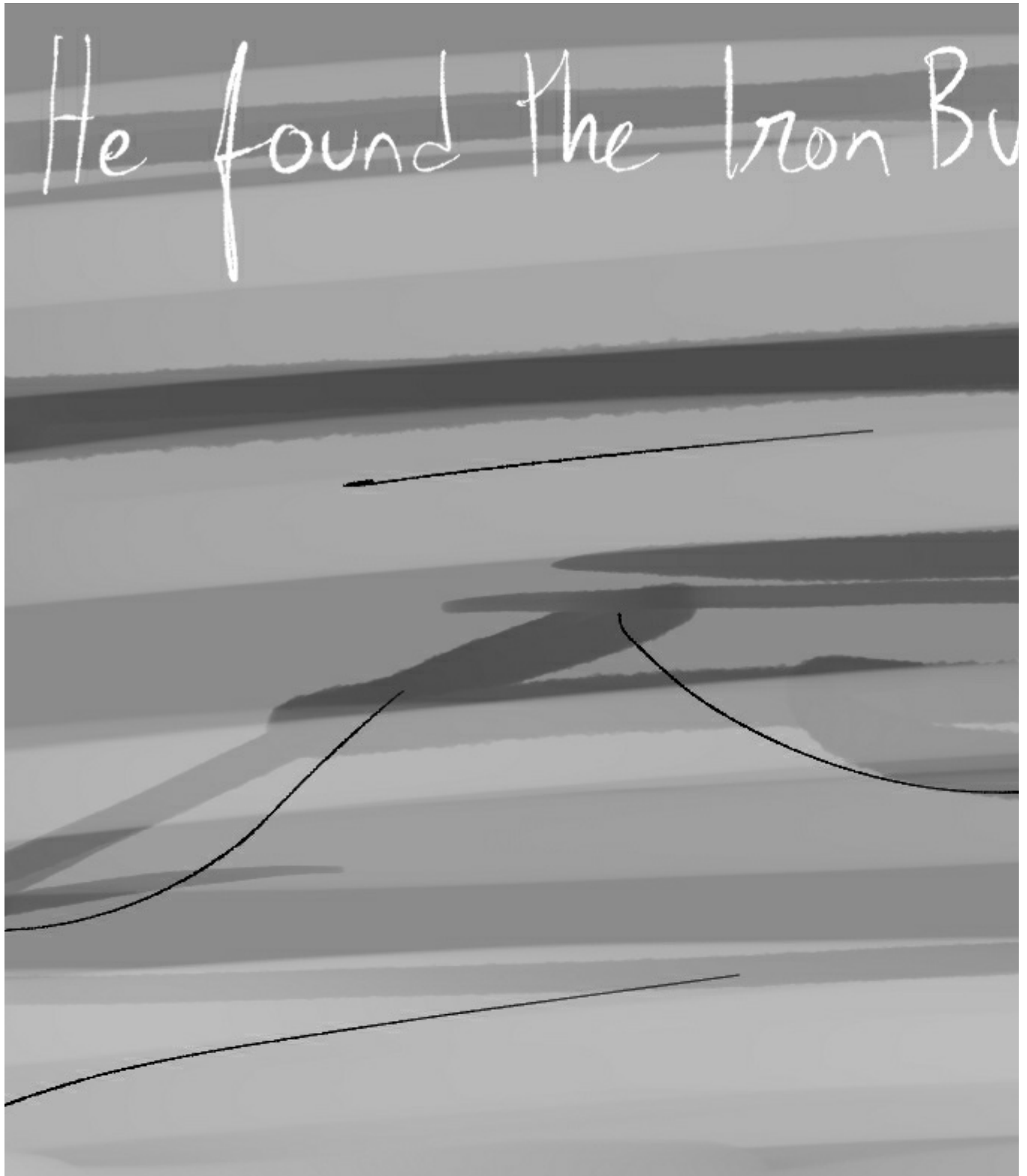
from the advisors about the Templars. They still needed to gather some of the noble houses of Orlais as well. There was also the issue of Redcliffe. What would happen if he successfully gained the mages? Would that alert Corypheus and would he tell the Envy demon to leave?

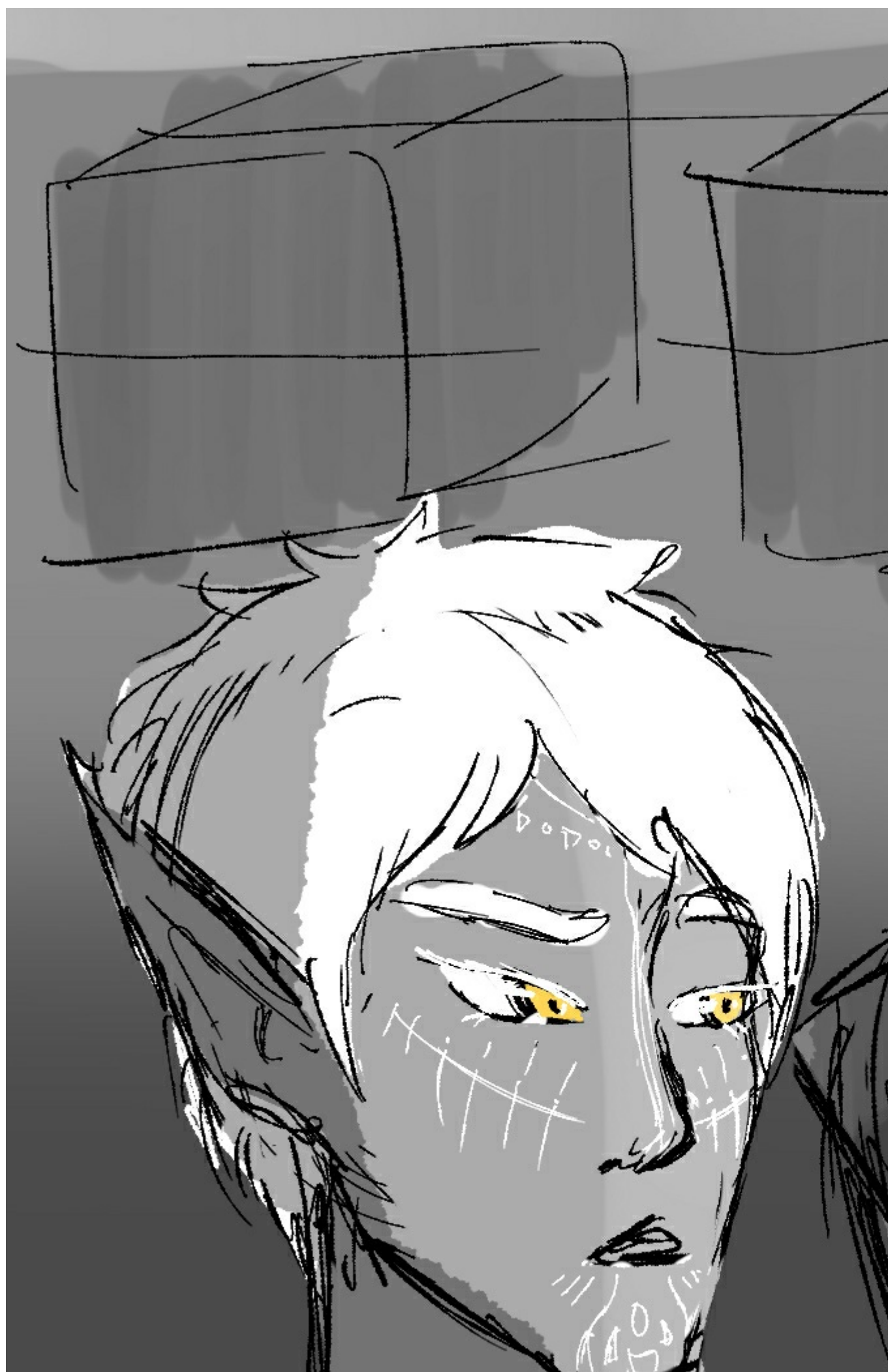
There were many things he couldn't risk. The moment he gains the mages' help, he would have to dash to Therinfal. This would be tight.

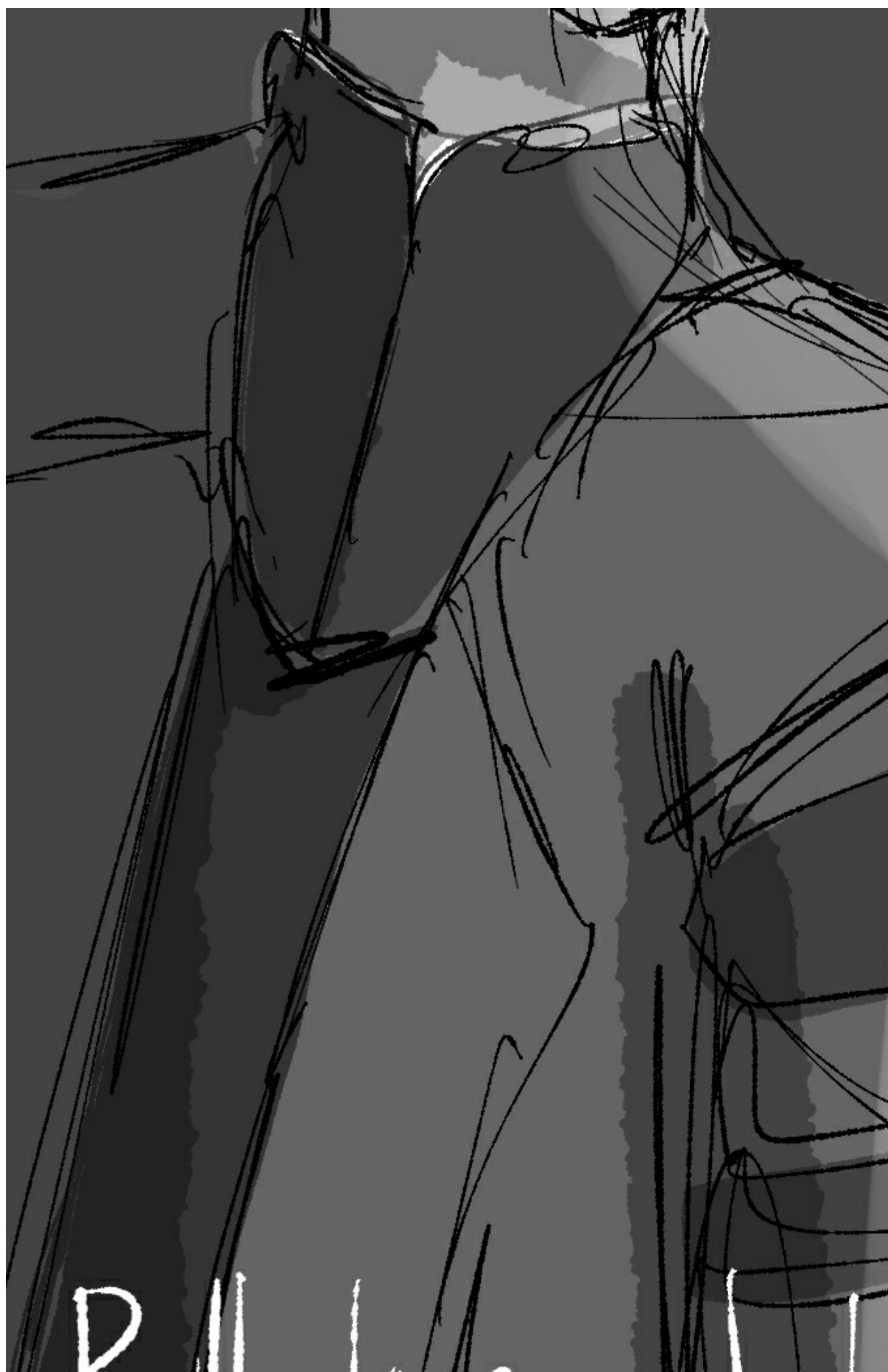
Clack.

Lavellan turned, expecting to find Solas.

Instead, he found the Iron Bull with his hand outstretched towards Lavellan, blocked by Solas' staff. The wooden blocks swayed. Bull turned to Solas, smile easy, but gaze sharp.









“Whoa there. Was just trying to get his attention,” he explained.

“Garner it in another manner. Preferably when he can see you.” Solas withdrew his staff and Bull grinned at Lavellan.

“Guess you don’t need me to be a bodyguard. You’ve already got one.”

Lavellan studied Solas but he was looking off into the horizon.

“Not quite,” said Lavellan. “He’s more of a promising debate partner.”

“Huh.” Bull studied him again, more openly this time. “I’ve known a few elves in my time. You’re tall for one. Sorry, you probably get that a lot.”

Lavellan laughed. “It’s fine.”

He looked at Solas. “You’re pretty tall too, though Mercy here’s got a smidge over you. Might be the hair. You’re pretty broad for one too.”

Probably because the ancient elves were gods-damned *massive*. Abelas was tall, too. So were the ancient elves who’d worked for Solas. When Solas had shifted to Fen’Harel’s form, he’d looked like a true ancient elf, which had made Lavellan petty. He’d liked being slightly taller than Solas.

Solas tilted his head, stared up at Bull and said, “You’re short for a Qunari.”

...Was he?

“You seen many Qunari before?”

Too many to be comfortable with. Lavellan recalled the hordes of Qunari he’d fought with, in both senses of the word, just to get to Solas.

“I’ve encountered a few during my travels,” Solas answered. “Those I’d approached were hostile. I avoided them from then on.”

“Ah, yeah, they’re like that.” He rubbed the back of his neck and turned to Lavellan. “So, Mercy, heard from Cassandra that you’re returning to the Hinterlands. Is it alright if I drop my men off at your base first? I’ll rejoin if you need me.”

Lavellan considered the new nickname. “Mercy?”

“Work in progress,” he said. “You made that Mercy Crest instead of fighting those mercenaries. I liked that. Knew you were doing good work.”

He blinked. “Thank you.” Bull looked so earnest and it warmed Lavellan for a breath, but then he recalled how easy it had been for Bull to swap that earnestness with apathy once the Qun had demanded it. “You can drop the Chargers off at Haven, that’s fine. It would be nice if you met us at the Hinterlands, but if not, that’s fine too.”

“Nah, I’ll be there then. We’ll head off now. Make good time.” He walked off and waved. “See you there, Mercy.”

That left him alone with Solas. Was this the universe’s way of conspiring against him? Leaving him alone with Solas?

“Mercy,” mused Solas. “An interesting choice.”

“I’m inclined to agree. I’ve killed more than I’ve saved.”

“Killing may be a mercy, depending on the circumstance.”

“Well, in my recent circumstances, they hadn’t been mercies.” Lavellan leaned against the fence. It was a rocky drop onto the lower coast below, so he tried not to put too much weight on it. “You’ve been keeping an eye out for me today.”

“Yes. You seemed especially uneasy about seeing the fighting. That, or you were uneasy about our new Qunari friend.”

There was a question in there.

“I met a Qunari, once,” he said. It was so easy giving in to Solas’ curiosity. “I thought we were friends. The moment the Qun demanded it, he turned against me.” He shrugged. “I suppose I’m wary. His loyalty to the Qun likely trumps any connections he makes with the Inquisition’s members. I guess I’m bracing myself for the inevitable hurt?”

“Yet you’d still let him join? Let him fight beside you?”

“I’m a masochist it seems,” he said and snorted. “Who knows? Maybe this one’s different. I should give him a chance.” Even as he said it, he doubted his words.

Solas regarded him, quiet. Had Solas been like this before? It felt as if their roles had reversed — Solas was now the one with the questions. Although, they were now on par with each other regarding secrets. At least Lavellan plans hadn’t backfired into something worse.

Not yet, anyway.

“Mercy,” Solas repeated. “Perhaps not too off the mark after all.”

Upon arrival at the Hinterlands, Lavellan was unsurprised to find Sera and Blackwall talking to each other in fierce whispers at camp, punctuated with Sera’s occasional sniggers. They both caught sight of him. Blackwall’s expression sobered and he stood and approached Lavellan.

“Warden Blackwall?” Lavellan asked.

“That is me, yes. You’re the Inquisition representative?”

“Something like that.”

“He’s the holy saviour, the chosen one, the Herald of Andraste,” introduced Varric with increasing flourish. Lavellan glared him into silence. Varric remained unapologetic.

Blackwall's eyes widened. "You're the Herald?" He scowled at Sera. "You didn't tell me!"

"It's 'cause you've got frig in your ears! All that bush went and crawled in there."

Blackwall cleared his throat. "Right. Maker, I should've known. I should've realised sooner."

"No harm done," said Lavellan. "It's not like I'm going to make you kneel and recite to me all of Threnodies. That'd be boring for both of us, I assume."

"No," agreed Varric. "He'd tell you to recite the Benedictions instead. It's his favourite."

"Varric, I told you I didn't mean to drop the fish on you."

"It was *raw*, Glow. And bloody."

Lavellan sighed. He'd dropped one of the fishes he'd been gutting for their lunch on Varric. So fussy.

"You shoot people for a living," Lavellan pointed out.

"Correction, I'm a businessman. And I'm a good distance away when I do the shooting."

"Warden Blackwall, why don't we talk somewhere without fussy dwarves throwing a fit?" he asked, ignored Varric's protests as he dragged Blackwall off to a more private section of the camp. After they had some semblance of quiet, Lavellan asked, "I hope Sera treated you alright?"

Sera's cackles and Varric's indignant yells from camp still managed to make its way towards them. What would it be like once Bull joined them? Creators, what a nightmare.

"She was good help against some bandits," said Blackwall. "Started talking about the daft tit who glowed sending her here on behalf of the Inquisition to find me. I had no idea she was referring to you."

Lavellan wasn't sure whether to laugh or groan. It became a strange mix of the two. "That's me. Glow, daft tit." He schooled his expression. "Yes, I'm here on behalf of the Inquisition. Our spymaster is worried about the Wardens' disappearance and whether it may have anything to do with the events at the Conclave."

Well, yes, the Wardens were involved, but Blackwall wasn't a Warden so all he could do was give vague reasons and excuses. Lavellan wasn't sure whether to laugh or weep. How had Blackwall survived this long? Still, Lavellan took pity on him and eased back on the questioning.

Lavellan hadn't known what to do with Blackwall last time. In the end, he'd heeded his wishes and had let Orlais execute him.

Sera hadn't spoken to him for a month.

Josephine had been dismal for longer.

In the late hours of the night, Lavellan had wondered whether he'd made the right choice, but at that point, late nights wondering whether he'd done the right thing was pretty much a hobby. In any case, he'd have to deal with the issue of Thom Rainier again.

His friends were filled with traitors and liars. It was almost comedic. Lavellan really had rotten luck. And a rotten heart because he still couldn't help but care about them. If only he could crush that little shit. It had gotten him into more trouble than it was worth.

“You plan to help?” Blackwall asked after his explanation. “Restore peace?”

“That’s the plan.”

Blackwall straightened his back and stared at Lavellan resolutely. Was there a better fate awaiting Rainier?

“If you’ll take me, I want to help the Inquisition in whatever way I can.”

Lavellan paused and made a show of assessing him, then smiled. “Welcome aboard. We appreciate your help.”

When they returned, he asked the scouts for a report of the Hinterlands’ state and immediately delegated jobs to groups, but he paused midway through his nattering and stared at his companions, who were listening to him without complaint.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I did it again.” He wasn’t Inquisitor. What was he doing?

“Glowy, none of us were complaining,” said Varric. “We have no idea where to start. Everything’s a giant mess. By all means, continue.”

Lavellan looked down and shuffled his feet. “Alright,” he said. “Then...”

They set to work on stabilising the Hinterlands. They closed rifts, finally spoke to Master Dennet and helped him with the farms and the black wolves, began construction on the watchtowers, and acquired more mounts. They also found a cult on the hills and earned agents out of them. Very lovely. All of which spanned over two and a half weeks with steady updates from the three advisors about the state of the preparation for the Templars.

By the last week of that month, he was preparing to head out with Solas, Blackwall, and Sera to rid the Eastern Road of bandits when a scout approached him with a letter in hand.

“Ser,” said the scout. He was young, Lavellan realised with a twist of his heart. How many children had taken shelter at Haven with their caretakers?

Small corpses in the snow—

No, focus.

“We just received this letter from Sister Nightingale,” the scout continued. “To give to you immediately.”

He accepted it and thanked the scout, opened the letter.

We’ve traced the Templars to an abandoned fortress called Therinfal Redoubt, a four-hour horseback ride away from the Hinterlands. Josephine and I have been working with Madame de Fer to call in houses from within Orlais. We expect to have the ten houses allying with us within a week.

-L

“What’s it?” asked Sera.

Lavellan folded the letter with a grim smile. “The start of us sitting both the mages and the Templars down.”

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan slowly assembling his crew of liars back together! It's a happy day for everyone.

Thank you for all the lovely comments <3 They all make my day.

Obnoxious fun fact of the week that's got nothing to do whatsoever with this: there's a breathable liquid called perfluorocarbon. It's highly oxygenated so you can breathe the liquid in and not die, and apparently, being taken out of it and transitioning to air breathing again simulates what it's like to be born. Neat!

Oh, it's also used in modern torture. Yeah, nasty. But also, it could potentially help deep-sea diving and space travel. Ah, the duality of human nature.

Where the children play

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

bringing unto them the tongues of fire—

“What do you mean Redcliffe village is still closed?” he asked the scout they met on the way to Redcliffe.

“They say they’re unwilling to risk opening the village when the rest of the Hinterlands are still unpredictable.”

Lavellan chewed on his bottom lip. “We’ve been stabilising the area for almost three weeks now. Are they still hesitant? The danger has significantly decreased.”

“They failed to elaborate.”

“I suppose that’s understandable,” said Solas. “They are still in danger of persecution from the locals and the refugees. Perhaps we can show that the Inquisition has treated the mages fairly. That, or continue with establishing stability so that they may at least come out to interact with us.”

“Why the bloody frig are we trying to talk to mages?” asked Sera, staying back even though the gates were closed and all the way on the other side of the road.

Lavellan turned and walked back the way they came. “Well, looks like we’re not.” He looked back over his shoulder at the portcullis blocking the rest of the Hinterlands from the Redcliffe area and couldn’t help the unsettled twisting of his stomach.

Well, if Redcliffe wasn’t going to budge, they may as well continue with ridding the Eastern Road of the bandits.

After they finished, Solas paused on the way back.

Lavellan looked over his shoulder. “Everything alright?”

He glanced back. “I believe I sense the ancient artefact of my people.”

My people. Try as Lavellan might, he couldn’t brush away the pang of hurt, no matter how short-lived.

“Oh bung off, what now?” asked Sera.

Solas narrowed his eyes at her. “If I were you, I would offer more interest in the matter, Sera, since this instrument may strengthen the Veil and prevent the spirits you so love from entering this realm.”

Well, it was technically the truth. Those ancient artefacts *could* strengthen the Veil, but they could just as easily weaken them. They were the anchor points holding a fabric tight over a surface. For now, it wasn’t in Solas or the Inquisition’s best interests to weaken the Veil, what with all the demons pouring out and the spirits being distressed from the Breach.

Sera stuck her tongue out at Solas and blew a raspberry. “Sacksplash. You try so hard to sound like

your brain's above your head.”

“And you place great importance in trying to make yourself sound nonsensical.”

Lavellan bit the inside of his cheek and faced Sera and Blackwall. “You two go on ahead,” he said. “Investigate that bandit hideout. Get Bull and Cassandra to go with you. Varric if he’s not busy.”

“Will you two be alright?” asked Blackwall.

“Probably. We’ll regroup at the lakeside camp.” They headed off with Sera throwing a final, venomous look over her shoulder. Lavellan pressed his lips into a thin line before he turned to Solas. “Alright Solas. Lead the way.”

Solas stared at Sera and Blackwall’s retreating forms. “You sent Sera away.”

“I sent both away.”

“With the express purpose of sending, specifically, Sera away but without isolating her.”

He sighed. “Consider it as me defusing a situation. Besides, she gets spooked enough about magic and elfy things.”

Solas gave him a peculiar look. “You could expose her to them and attempt to normalise them. By sending her away, you cover her eyes and ears and reaffirm her beliefs that such things are indeed unnatural and should be escaped.”

“Yes, but I’m not immediately throwing her off the deep end.”

“The artefact I’m pursuing is barely threatening. It’s a rather good start, in fact.”

You sure? “The way you mentioned it made it sound foreboding. Forgive me for jumping to conclusions.”

“Indeed. You could have just asked.”

Lavellan refrained from grumbling at him. They walked towards the elven artefact.

“I’ve noticed,” said Solas, “that you seem to be protective of Sera. Is there a reason?”

“She’s the youngest of us,” he said. “And she’s close to my sister’s age. I suppose I can’t help being protective.”

“Is she similar to your sister?”

“Yes and no.” He left it at that.

“Even if she hates elves such as you?”

“Solas, you know we tend to almost fight when we get on the subject about elves.”

Solas stopped walking and Lavellan scowled. Oh no. “I have noticed that, yes. I have also noticed that you avoid it each time. I thought perhaps you disliked confrontations, but clearly you have no problem instructing others and arguing with them about how best to approach things.”

Great! He was in an argumentative mood. Lavellan bit his lip and faced Solas with a scowl. “Do you have a problem with me, Solas? I thought I made it clear that if you disliked my being bossy,

you're free to tell me."

"It is not bossiness, Herald." Oh piss him. The title again. "But yes, I suppose I do have a problem. Do you feel anger?"

Did he feel— Every fucking day? His scowl darkened. "Yes, Solas, I *do* feel anger. Any other emotion you wish to confirm the existence of?"

"You have been belittled, underestimated, ignored, disdained, or often all of the above for the sole reason of being an elf. Yet you lie down and take it. For somebody quick to defend others, you are slow to parry for yourself. You let yourself be around such disdainful people, allow yourself to change or hide to suit *their* whims. You claim you do not wish to lose yourself within the title of Herald and yet you allow yourself to be swallowed."

"[Sul'ema em hamin^{\[1\]}](#), it's called being civil! What? I fight them and prove every single legend about the Dalish and the elves true? That we are nothing but savages who prance around naked in the moonlight and sacrifice infants to our malevolent gods?"

"I did not say to take up arms and fight! At the very least, use your words. I have seen you use them and you can be clever with them, and yet you abstain. [Ema solas^{\[2\]}](#)!"

Have some *pride*? "You want me to be smart? To be glib? I don't know what kind of man you've made me out to be, Solas, but it isn't someone who can think up of something on his feet to rebuke the disdainful while staying out of trouble, *while also* thinking of what to do to stop the Breach and find whoever caused the Conclave explosion and navigate an unknown world that I'm supposedly the saviour of."

He was breathless by the end of his tirade but Creators he was not *done*.

"I say the wrong thing, you think I'm the only one who gets in trouble? How many elven workers do you see at Haven? I piss someone off and they can't take it out on me, but what about the elven girl just passing by to drop off some bread? What about Sera? What about *you*?" He rubbed his face and shook his head. "Well done, I'm angry. Was this what you wanted?" He turned and started walking. "Find your damned artefact."

Solas was silent. That's fucking new. Solas was *silent* after an argument.

"Mahanon—"

"[Ava etunash^{\[3\]}](#)," he snapped. "Just walk."

The atmosphere remained stormier than one of Solas' electric spells as they walked towards the elven ruin. There they found a Dalish mage, who introduced herself as Mihris after Lavellan and Solas assisted her with defeating a demon. She completely ignored Solas though, and Lavellan's irritation worsened.

"We need focused magical energy to move forward," she said once they reached a pile of crumbled rocks blocking the entrance. She turned to Solas. "You, *flat-ear*, can you manage it?"

"His name is Solas," Lavellan cut in.

Solas merely gave him a look that said, *You are only proving my point*, then nodded at Mihris with a hollow smile. "[Ma nuvenin, da'len^{\[4\]}](#)."

The three of them traversed the ruin, and Lavellan took out his anger on the demons within.

By the foot of an altar stood the artefact, alone in the dark. Solas knelt and fiddled with it. A green barrier enveloped the sphere as the Veil strengthened and he felt it like a whisper over his skin.

“There,” murmured Solas. “The wards are working.”

Lavellan stared at the artefact. Was there a way to block Solas from them in the future so that he couldn’t use them to weaken the Veil?

Mihris and Solas engaged in conversation but Lavellan tuned them out. He crouched beside the artefact and traced the surface of it, his fingers tingling when they passed the green barrier. Was the Anchor the key to these as well?

The Anchor flared and locked together with the barrier, like with the rifts, but weaker.

“What are you doing?” Solas asked, voice clipped.

“Wondering if the mark and the artefacts are connected.” He experimented with pulling at the connection.

The Veil wavered. Lavellan gasped.

Solas grabbed his wrist and yanked it away from the artefact, the Anchor's green flares sputtering away.

Lavellan narrowed his eyes at him and pointedly looked at the hand that had arrested his wrists. Solas let go. Still, Lavellan smiled to himself. The Anchor belonged to Fen’Harel, and it was Fen’Harel who’d created the Veil, so it made sense that the two were connected.

“That’s a yes,” said Lavellan.

“Perhaps,” said Solas. “Or perhaps the two forces will contradict one another and result in detrimental consequences for you! In the future, I suggest that you do not do that again.”

Lavellan pursed his lips. “Alright. Pardon the curiosity.”

Mihris cleared her throat. “I suppose I must be going as our alliance has concluded. Thank you for the help. It seems the ancestors left a little something for me as well. Go in peace, stranger.” She smiled, amulet clasped in hand.

Solas frowned, opened his mouth, but Lavellan interjected with a pleasant, “[Mythal’enaste, Mihris. Dareth shiral^{\[5\]}](#).”

“Mythal’enaste,” she returned. “I wish you luck with your Inquisition.”

She left and Solas’ displeasure felt more palpable than the Veil.

“Don’t give me that look,” Lavellan grumbled.

“I am not looking at you,” he said, snippy. Lavellan still wasn’t sure whether he should be proud or careful that he could draw out some pettiness from Solas.

They walked back to the lakeside camp in a frosty silence. He was ready to jump out of his skin by the time they arrived and Lavellan considered hunting again just to get away from Solas. Their dynamic before hadn’t been like this at all. He and Solas got along somewhat fine and any

disagreements they had were more along the lines of a polite debate. Hostilities had been quick to fade.

Their shift in dynamic could be pinned on Lavellan having changed as a person. Of course Solas wouldn't react the same. Whoever Lavellan had been before all of this was gone and dead, having joined the ranks of the fallen in their mountain of ash.

He eyed Solas and caught him already staring.

"You let that Dalish mage take the amulet," said Solas.

"You find fault with that?"

"You let her take a magical item that she likely does not understand or know how to use." Solas smiled wryly. "Ah, but I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise. The Dalish have long since claimed mastery over matters beyond their comprehension."

"I suppose you would know it all then! Fade-walker such as you, I'm certain you've seen countless images of the past replayed. The Dalish must seem like children to you."

"You mock and yet you are correct." Solas' smile vanished. "The Dalish do not seem like children for they *are* children. Scrabbling at the scattered scraps of their history. I walked the Fade where scenes from ancient past revealed the truth that they have told as myth. Where myth was blurred and passed along as truth. And yet, they refused to listen to any knowledge I'd offered."

"Please tell me you offered information in person and not through dreams. Because I can assure you that anybody would suspect demonic interference when a stranger appears in the Fade offering information about the ancient elves." That, or the Dalish had suspected that he was Fen'Harel. There were many stories of the trickster god dispensing dark knowledge at his whim.

"What does it matter? Both yielded similar results. The Dalish chose to remain unaware, holding superiority over the *flat-ear* and returning to play-acting their pale imitations."

Lavellan's chest knotted and gripped his ribs, stretched them inwards, fire roaring in his blood. He clasped his hands behind his back as he fully faced Solas so that he wouldn't give in to the temptation of punching him across the jaw.

"We are *trying*," said Lavellan. "I beg your pardon if we don't quite meet your lofty expectations."

"Ah, yes, of course. It was an error on my part. Of course it is unfair of me to expect the Dalish to accomplish what they cannot."

Lavellan's laugh bordered on hysterical. "Solas, it sounds to me as if you blame the elves for things they can't control because you feel ashamed of *your* failures." Solas looked as if Lavellan had punched him anyway. "Yes, we are trying, yes we are aware it isn't *good enough*, but at least we're still enduring. At least we rebel in their own way by preserving the identity and culture stolen from us. You're so focused on the fact that we get things wrong that you forget to see that we're not solely defined by our past."

"Shall we forget then? Wave our hands and accept the new, broken shambles of truth?"

"Don't put words in my mouth. I said our attempts to discover and preserve the past is not our only defining characteristic."

"Of course. They're quite condescending too, are they not?"

“So are you.” He and Solas stared one another down. “Does that make you Dalish then?”

They’d fought like this too. At the edge of the world, they had fought, but with blades rather than words. The soft conversations had seemed far then. The mutual sharing of curiosity and answers and unanswered questions, the teasing, the witty banter — they had become reflections smudged on the edges of a cracked mirror. Afterthoughts.

“Yes, the Dalish can be wary and distrustful of outsiders because we’re trying to survive in a world desperate to erase us,” said Lavellan. “Yes, we can be hurtful. But do you know what we also are? We are persevering, caring, curious. We are stupid; we are wise. And do you know what we’re starting to sound like? Literally anybody else! We’re something different from the ancient elves but not necessarily worse. We’re not shadows playing make-believe. We have the *right* to recover our past despite whatever mistakes we may pick up on the way, we have a right to mourn it, to hold onto it.” Lavellan shook. Anger always made him tremble from his fingers to his lungs. “I ask you then, is your problem really with the fact that we refuse to see truth or that we are not what you wanted us to be?”

Solas' gaze darkened and his shoulders tensed, reminding Lavellan of a wolf crouching and raising its hackles and baring its fangs.

Bring it.

Solas opened his mouth, scathing remark ready—

“Oh for the love of Andraste’s sacred knickers, who left these two alone?” Varric asked.

Solas blinked and the anger bled away from his eyes, the wolf slinking back to its shadowed corner. Lavellan looked over his shoulder and found the rest of his companions arriving at camp, all in varied states of haggard or exhausted.

“He told us to go on ahead!” Sera protested. “How was I supposed to know?”

Varric shook his head mournfully. “Almost lasted the week. This is what I get for being optimistic.”

“Told you,” chuckled Bull. “Pay up.”

Lavellan scowled. Solas walked past Lavellan and left the camp without another word. Cassandra awkwardly moved aside to let him through.

“Solas, will you be alright alone?” she called after him.

“Yes.” And he was gone.

“Well, what crawled up his arse and died?” asked Sera. Lavellan yanked his bow out of his tent and restrung it.

His companions settled themselves around the fire but a few shot him glances.

“The bandit hideout?” Lavellan asked to dispel the heavy atmosphere and distract himself.

“All taken care of,” said Varric. “It’s more of a villa than a hideout.”

Lavellan stood. “Then we can turn that villa into something far more useful. Better medical facilities maybe. Or places to sleep. Both. A kind of sanctuary.” He uncapped his quiver, slung it

over his back, and double-checked his bowstring. "I'll get rid of the rifts in the woods around it later."

"Where you headed, Mercy?" Bull asked.

"Hunting."

Cassandra scrutinised him. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"No." He shot her a sunny smile. "Better I hit a ram in the lung than Solas in the balls though."

Sera sniggered but Blackwall elbowed her. Lavellan left camp.

In the end, he didn't go out hunting. Rather, he sought out the tallest point of the Hinterlands, which was a hill behind the farms, and scaled it. He rested there for a moment and leaned his head against the tree, his anger having mostly subsided from the walk over.

"It sounds to me as if you blame the elves for things they can't control because you feel ashamed of your failures."

Lavellan hadn't meant for that to slip. So many stupid things he could've said if it had gone on for longer. This was why he didn't want to argue with Solas about the elves.

Still, it must be lonely. Solas had woken up in a foreign time that was a result of his mistakes, had attempted to reach out to the remaining elves only to be turned away or shunned.

"It was like walking through a world of Tranquil."

"We're not even real to you," mumbled Lavellan. He hugged his knees closer to his chest. Lavellan had been *special*, or some shit, had become real to Solas because what? They were lovers? Not that it mattered because like the Iron Bull, Solas could turn away from their connections to achieve some higher goal.

Lavellan stared at the patch of crystal grace beside him and plucked one of the flowers. He ran his left fingers over the petals, just to remind himself that his left hand was there, the wind brushing his hair back and fanning over his face while the stream nearby burbled a gentle lullaby.

Exhaustion eventually caught up to him and he closed his eyes.

It was a lake on the edge of the world.

The water was waist-deep and crystalline, but there was no bottom in its depth. Long below, a fall into the abyss. The abyss was strangely beautiful.

There was a black wolf on the lake's shores.

They stared at each other. The wolf crouched and growled, snapped its jaws at him. He almost reached for a weapon, ready should the wolf spring and close its jaws over his throat, but he paused.

That was not a wolf ready for an attack.

That was a wolf attempting to protect itself.

He tilted his head in curiosity at it. Peculiar. The darkness of its fur dripped, thicker than blood, wispier than smoke. Silver dripped from its snarling mouth. The wolf was both titanic and diminished, had too many eyes and none at all, ears pricked forward in alarm yet folded back in fear. He took a gentle step forward. The water shifted and shimmered, rang clear in the din, and he reached out his left hand. Sunlight spilled from his fingers.

The wolf ceased snarling. It stopped straddling the all or nothing.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. The waters danced with the melody of his voice. He chanced another step but the wolf snarled once more, so he stopped. “Alright, I won’t come closer. Will you come into the water then?”

His hand was still outstretched. The wolf stopped its growling, regarded him with the eyes of a bloodied battlefield.

It dipped one of its paws into the lake.

The crystalline waters burst with crimson, the pulp of a fruit rupturing between cracked lips and dyeing them with blood. Red waters thickened.







And the abyss pulled him into its depths.

Howling.

Lavellan awoke with a gasp. His left hand had crushed the crystal grace in his sleep and he stared at its wilted remains. Well, how ominous. He rubbed his face. Of course he'd dream about a wolf.

Never mind that. He must have slept for longer than he'd anticipated since it was now dusk and the sun was gone from the purple sky. He better head back before the others thought he'd died or left them.

When he returned to the lakeside camp, Cassandra marched up to him, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shook him furiously.

"Where have you *been*? You've been gone for hours!"

"Seeker, you're shaking the poor guy too hard," said Varric. "But what she said. We were worried."

Cassandra stopped shaking him and Lavellan laughed airily. "I found a really pretty place and ended up falling asleep. I must've slept for longer than I thought."

"The others have gone to look for you. Hopefully they will be back soon."

"Has Solas come back?" he asked then cursed himself. He was supposed to be mad.

"Briefly, but we mentioned you have not returned and he set off in search for you as well."

His brows raised. "Really?"

She released his shoulders from her death grip and his ligaments thanked the release. Cassandra's frown eased. "What were you two fighting about?"

Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. "Elves."

"Can't you elves just play nice for once?" sighed Varric.

Lavellan almost laughed again. All he could think of was Briala's agents versus Solas', and then the entire history of the ancient elves. No, elves had never played nice. But Varric did say 'for once' so he sighed and asked, "Do you know where he went? I should talk to him."

"Is that a good idea?" asked Varric. "It's dark and you *did* just get into a fight. Although, we were all kind of waiting for it to happen."

"We weren't that bad, were we?"

"Glowy, it was like waiting for a bomb to explode."

Lavellan winced.

"Are you going to find him to reconcile?" Cassandra asked.

"That's the plan at least. I wouldn't be surprised if we end up arguing again but I'll try to talk to him. Sort things out."

Cassandra assessed him for a silent moment, then nodded. "Very well. He mentioned searching in Hafter's Woods."

"With the *bears* lurking about? And unclosed rifts? Is he mad?" Lavellan grabbed one of the lanterns. "I'll be back."

"I'll accompany you. The bears and demons are difficult to handle alone."

He shook his head and smiled. “I’ll be alright, thank you.” Cassandra frowned, unconvinced. “I promise. The Dalish have methods of warding off bears but I can't extend them to you to keep you safe. I can also sense where the rifts are so I can avoid them. I’ll ultimately be safer alone.”

She hesitated, but she relented. “I trust you know what you’re doing. I hope it works out.”

Somehow, he knew she didn’t mean the bears.

“Me too.”

Lavellan set out, illuminated by a lone lantern in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

And there they go

Pssst, there's [a playlist](#) for this fic.

Translation

[1] **Sul'ema em hamin:** Give me a break (lit. give me rest) [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ema solas:** Stand tall (lit. have pride) [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Ava etunash:** Eat shit [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Ma nuvenin, da'len:** As you say, little one [\[↑\]](#)

[5] **Mythal'enaste, Mihris. Dareth shiral:** Mythal's favour, Mihris. Safe journey. [\[↑\]](#)

Within the forests lurk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

a strange and curious thing—

The forest was far too quiet.

It was likely due to the Fade rifts and demons displacing the native fauna save for the bears. Bears gave zero shits. Lavellan aspired to be like a bear.

Still, rationalising the silence did nothing to ease his mind. His footsteps were too loud even as he stepped with a hunter's practiced prow. The Veil was also unsteady here, flitting over his skin, swaying and orbiting the Anchor but never lingering. He remained wary of shapes in the shadows. Could be bears. Maybe demons. Wouldn't that be rotten?

There was only one moon visible tonight, just this side close to full, smearing clawing shadows across the ground.

“Stop scaring yourself,” he grumbled.

It was quieter than the dead. So quiet that that the Well of Sorrows' whispers was like a roll of thunder in his mind, further scattering his focus.

A cloud passed over the moon and casted him in the pall of night.

[Ma laim.](#)^[1]

Lavellan halted. The lantern creaked at the sudden stop.

The Well's unintelligible whispers ghosted over his awareness. Lavellan strained to listen. Words which were usually broken rang with clarity, like the bells of an ancient, ruined tower.

[Dirtharal junua em. Din nadas](#)^[2].

He scowled. “[Banalas](#)!”^[3]

[Harem himem harellan](#)^[4].

Could a collection of the detached voices of the dead laugh? It certainly sounded like it to Lavellan. He rubbed his eyes. The deceived became the deceiver, indeed.

The whispers rescinded. Afterthoughts once more.

Did the Well have to tell him those ominous things while he was roaming the woods at night? Must it really? It was the Well of Sorrows, not the Well of Terrible Omens.

He ground his teeth and walked. Every pocket of darkness could be hosting a menace, and while Lavellan had no fear of the dark, he didn't extend the same courtesy to ambiguity. His free hand rested on his dagger hilt.

A glow in his periphery.

Lavellan's heart pounded. All the stories that their elders had told them of the creatures lurking within the woods beneath the curtain of darkness reared its head. He couldn't shake them off. Creators, he was thirty and still afraid of bedtime stories.

But something shifted in the shadows within the trees. He held his lantern up higher.

Another shift.

He let go of the dagger and placed the lantern down, unslung his bow and nocked an arrow, breathed, waited, keen eyes on the dark.

The darkness gained shape. Red eyes.

A wolf.

Panic surged and he drew in haste, ready to release—

The sound of wooden blocks rang in the din.

Lavellan blinked.

Solas stepped out from the trees just as the clouds parted, the tip of his staff glowing green and *how did I miss that?*

"Fenedhis." Lavellan relaxed and returned the arrow. "You startled me."

Solas was unearthly in the moonlight, the play of shadow and light sharpening his features and seemingly cascading off him as he walked. He had his moments of grace. Lavellan still couldn't speak during them.

Well, he was right. The shadow he saw was a wolf. Just... the Dread kind.

"As to be expected when one roams the woods at night," said Solas.

"I'm only roaming it because Cassandra told me you were stupid enough to look for me here of all places."

Solas frowned. The light from his staff was brighter than the lantern.

"I was not the one who'd vanished for hours," said Solas. "They said you went out hunting. I assumed you may have been foolish enough in your anger to go after something difficult."

"You think I'm stupid enough to get myself killed when I'm angry?"

"How should I know? I've never seen you angered before."

"If you must know, I didn't even get to hunt. I found a pretty place and fell asleep." He picked the lantern up. "That's why I was gone for hours."

They shuffled in the awkward silence that followed. Lavellan nodded at the direction back to camp.

"Come on. Let's..." He gave the surroundings an uneasy look. "Let's get out of here. The Veil is strange here and I suspect the rifts have driven away the wildlife. It's eerie."

Solas looked around with a sour twist of his lips. “I agree.”

Lavellan stifled a snort as they walked, Solas leading with his light. Their first agreement of the day.

“I almost shot at you,” Lavellan admitted. And because he wasn’t done being a shit, he said, “I thought you were a massive wolf. The stories that the Hahren told us as children returned. It was silly. I thought it may have been Fen’Harel.”

Solas was silent. Lavellan watched the back of his head.

“Would it have been so terrible to be seen by the Dread Wolf?” asked Solas.

“That would depend on his intentions.” Lavellan grinned. “Perhaps you are actually him, masquerading as my friend and here I am, following blindly.”

Solas glanced at him over his shoulder. And smiled. “If true, then you would stand no chance.”

Lavellan laughed so he wouldn’t burst into tears. “[Palahna em](#)^[5].”

“[Is elem](#)^[6].”

“Then if you are indeed Fen’Harel, answer my question.” It was probably unwise to keep pushing the matter further. He couldn’t risk Solas becoming suspicious, but, well... It was much too fun.

The wooden blocks knocked with every step they took. “*Am* I Fen’Harel?”

“Hey now, I’m the one asking the questions.”

“Ah, I beg your pardon. Ask away.”

Lavellan stared at the stars. “Which Elvhen god has the most luscious locks?”

Solas was quiet, radiating confusion. Lavellan could track the exact second he understood. Solas shot him a warning glance. “Mahanon—”

“Fen—”

“No—”

“*Hairel*.”

Lavellan cackled at Solas’ disappointed and disapproving noises.

“By all means, do continue laughing,” said Solas. “I’m certain the bears and demons adore the sound of your mirth.”

“I’m *howling* with laughter!”

The terrible wolf puns followed Solas all the way back to camp. Everybody glanced up when they returned. It seemed Sera, Blackwall, and Bull had returned from looking for him too. They now had fish roasting over the flames and Lavellan didn’t realise how hungry he’d gotten.

“Was the spooky forest full of demons a great bonding experience?” Bull asked.

“Quite,” said Solas, sufficiently hassled.

Lavellan sniggered, grin returning. “Well! It’s a good thing we arrived in time for dinner. I’m so hungry I could—”

“Enough—”

“*Wolf* it all down.”

Solas hit Lavellan’s shin with his staff. He yelped and rubbed the offending spot but he wasn’t done.

“Well, now I’m *howling* in pain.”

Sera erupted into guffaws and Lavellan’s grin widened into a shit-eating one.

The sleeping elixir's blue translucence mocked him as he swirled the bottle in his hand.

In the end, he put it aside and crept out of his tent again. He had a feeling this would become routine.

The camp was silent but it wasn’t the eerie silence of Hafter’s Woods. The waterfall trickled and the crickets sang and somebody snored softly. Sera, probably. This lakeside camp was nice but their group was getting too big.

The sound of wooden blocks caught his attention.

“Why are you still up?” asked Solas.

Lavellan turned, found Solas huddled beneath the tree beside the small pool of water.

“I could ask you the same,” said Lavellan. “I know you like to dream.”

Solas smiled. “Earlier, I was accosted by children selling pastries. Their mother was ill and so they had taken over momentarily to continue baking and selling in her stead. I failed to realise that they had used a spice which would inhibit my dreaming.”

“Surely it couldn’t have affected you that much if they were merely used as spices?”

“I...” He hesitated. Then bowed his head as if tucking it into his chest. “Overindulged.”

Lavellan chuckled. Solas’ careful control could only be undone by pastries and frilly cakes.

“But I presume your sleeplessness cannot be pinned on pastry,” said Solas.

“I wish it could.” Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping for a while. I have sleeping elixirs but... Well, I usually sit on the edge over there and watch the stars, but we’ve gotten a little crowded here.”

Lavellan watched Solas, tucked tight under his tree, and the years of longing and missing buried beneath the turbulence of hurt and anger resurfaced, punched him in the stomach. He didn’t want to keep arguing with Solas, but he knew they still would.

Even so, it was a moment of weakness when Lavellan asked, "Would you like to walk with me?"

Solas peered at him. Lavellan wasn't sure whether he wanted Solas to accept or decline, but then, Solas stood and a relieved breath filled him.

"So long as you cease with the terrible wolf puns," said Solas.

"Do you not appreciate them? Ah, perhaps you're not the Dread Wolf after all. I'm positive Fen'Harel would have loved them."

Solas hummed and they walked away from camp. He wasn't sure where they were going, but they descended the hill towards the King's Road.

"If he did enjoy them, what would you do then?" Solas asked. "The Dalish would say earning his favour is not wise."

Fen'Harel would break my damn heart if I earned his favour. My arm too while he was at it.

"Are you being rhetorical?" asked Lavellan.

"I'm being completely serious."

The moon lit their way. Lavellan eyed Solas whose gaze was fixed ahead.

"What would I do if I gained Fen'Harel's favour?" Lavellan mused. What was with this line of questioning? "A very interesting question, though I'm not sure why you ask?"

Solas knotted the blocks to his staff so they would stop making noise. He knotted it quick. Lavellan wasn't sure if he was proud or exasperated that he'd picked it up so fast.

"Must there be a reason for every question?" asked Solas. "In any case, answers, even ones meant for odd questions, reveal a part of the person."

"You're saying you want to get to know me?"

"I... Yes. So, Fen'Harel?"

Lavellan thought on the question, kicked a stray pebble and watched it skid across the path.

"When I was younger, I loved the stories about Fen'Harel," he admitted.

"Which? The stories detailing his tendency to feast on the souls of infants and children lost in the woods?" he asked. Lavellan grimaced because yes, those *were* stories he had heard about the Dread Wolf too.

"I was more referring to the stories of his cunning. Or, well, I suppose the Keeper had called them *cautionary tales*."

"I see," said Solas, careful and wary with his answer. "And you enjoyed these stories of cunning?"

"I did. And I wondered about them. My Keeper warned us that the Dread Wolf lied, that he cannot be trusted and the clan must be protected from him." He observed Solas' reactions through the corner of his eye. "But you know, he never actually lied. Not outright. I thought that was interesting, though nobody answered when I asked questions about it. Told me asking about the Dread Wolf will only bring about trouble." He scowled, recalled his indignance when he was younger for what child did not wish for an answer to their queries?

Solas looked at him then. "That is unsurprising."

Lavellan huffed. "And unsatisfying. I let it go eventually, but nobody likes to feel hushed when they're curious. At least I don't." Solas hummed in agreement, used the end of his staff to push a plank of wood off the path. "But as much as I respected his cleverness, I disliked some of his actions."

"Thus, you admire and yet despise the Dread Wolf?"

"No, maybe not those words. Respect yet disapproved, perhaps. I respect his cunning but disapprove of his actions. They were unnecessarily cruel in the stories. But since my Keeper called them cautionary tales, I treated them as such. Not actual truth. So who knows what Fen'Harel is truly like?" Lavellan smiled to himself. "Then I began asking about them under the guise of wanting to know how to better protect the clan against him. 'I just want to study how he goes about his tricks,' I said. My sister saw through me though, but she still snuck me more stories of the Dread Wolf after her lessons with the Keeper."

"Hanon, you're going to get me in trouble!"

He grinned. "Only if we tell, which we won't. So what have you got for me?"

Ellana threw her head back to sigh dramatically but she indulged him. "Fine," she huffed. "Have you heard of the story with the boar and the blind elf?"

His grin widened.

How he'd enjoyed those nights when they'd whispered and spun those stories in their aravel under the soft light of Ellana's magic while the rest of the clan slept. The stories had given him comfort. Their mother had often told them stories before they slept, but after her death, he and Ellana had told stories of their own to fill the void. They'd also sang her lullaby to each other. It was the only way they could sleep otherwise. The practice had continued even as they'd grown older, though the stories had become less fictional, had become summaries of each other's days.

Maybe that was partly why he couldn't sleep well now. Even in the past timeline, he'd had Solas' stories to lull him to sleep.

"Ah," murmured Solas, a delighted spark in his eyes. "Your own little rebellion."

Lavellan gave him a strange look. "Not really."

"No? You have been actively discouraged from seeking knowledge and yet you found a way to do so."

He *would* approve of that, wouldn't he? Lavellan laughed. "You make me sound like a troublemaking youth."

"Were you not?"

"I have it on good authority that I was well-behaved."

Solas made an unconvinced noise.

"But going back to your question," said Lavellan, "if Fen'Harel became fond of me, I would need to be clever enough to understand what he's saying with what he's *not* saying."

“And do you suppose you would be clever enough?”

Lavellan looked at the stars with a small, cryptic smile. “He can come find out for himself.”

That elicited a surprised huff of laughter from Solas.

“And since my Keeper won’t answer me,” continued Lavellan, “I may as well get the answers from the source, right?”

“You would approach a figure the Dalish have painted as the traitor of your gods,” said Solas, “and *ask* him questions?”

“Yes,” he said, unfazed.

“Just like that?”

“You think I’m stopping at questions? I’m demanding he tell me stories, both truth and fiction. So long as he’s forthcoming about which is which. Or maybe I’ll have to figure it out myself. Either way.”

“You would not ask for power? Vengeance upon enemies?”

“What for? Quite a waste of time, and it’s already been established that apparently, he likes to teach people a hidden lesson with his favours. Besides, there are plenty of people mad with power, plenty of those mad from *looking* for power. It corrupts. Then you believe you can do anything and that surely what you think the best course of action is applies to everyone. Or you forget about others in the first place. No, I don’t want power.”

And yet the world had seen it fit to wrap it around his throat.

“And you would like to hear his stories instead?” asked Solas.

“Yes. I like stories. Partly why I like Varric. He always sounds like he’s weaving one in the moment.” He chewed on his lip. “And partly why I like you. You’ve travelled far in your dreams. You have marvellous things to share.”

That stopped Solas. Lavellan stopped walking as well and faced him.

“What?” Lavellan asked.

Solas watched Lavellan as if he were a new species. “Nothing. Simply, I had assumed you weren’t fond of me.”

“Because of the argument we had?”

“Among other things. And you’ve mentioned that I reminded you of... whoever had hurt you in the past.”

“Solas, I never disliked you.” And wasn’t that the painful truth? Even after everything... Enduring his love was a path of sorrow and hurt and fury. Lavellan should hate him, should curse him and slash his name off Lavellan’s pitiful heart, but he could never bring himself to do it. Could never remove Solas. Or Fen’Harel. Or whatever his true name was, buried beneath the layers of disguises and ancient sins. “And I’m sorry I came across otherwise. I was angry with you, and I don’t guarantee we won’t argue again because I’m certain we will—” Solas smiled briefly at that— “but I don’t dislike you. I enjoy your company.”

That struck Solas silent. He took a step forward towards Lavellan, and another, until they were side by side.

"Thank you," said Solas. "If it matters, I enjoy your company too."

"As you rightfully should," he joked. "I'm a treat and a half."

"And so very humble too."

The King's Road and the surrounding area was in the middle of reparations. Lavellan made sure to stay on the cleared path since he and Solas were barefoot. He'd been wearing shoes for a while so his feet had gotten a little unused to rougher terrains again.

"I do not mean to start another fight," said Solas, "but I cannot... understand how you can be content with learning and preserving the wrong information. Should you not strive to pass down accurate history, no matter how uncomfortable?"

"It's not about whether the information is wrong or right, it's about keeping our culture alive. Our identity. Keeping our place in the world. Fighting to say that we have a right to remain here just as much as anybody else and that they can't make us fade because, what? Our ears are longer?"

"What if you perpetuate harmful biases? What if the information you sought to keep blinds you and pushes you to repeat a mistake your ancestors have done?"

Lavellan could tell Solas was doing his best to be on good behaviour and keep his voice level, so he returned the courtesy.

"We're doing the best we can with what we have," Lavellan continued. "So much has been lost over time from persecution or from humans trampling on it in their conquests. Still, the truth will always resurface at some point. Maybe not now, but it's still one step closer over doing nothing. And maybe the information could be wrong, but that doesn't make it useless. It could still contain lessons."

They settled themselves on a small hillside, legs dangling over the edge.

"Some would argue the Dalish are too stuck in the past," murmured Solas.

"What do you think?"

"I am more interested in hearing your opinion on the matter."

Lavellan chewed on that, fiddled with the hem of his sleeve. "There's a danger of wallowing. There's always a danger of that, but I think the circumstances are different. We're trying to recover and safeguard what we can. Nobody's shitting on Orlesian historians for being *too stuck in the past*, now, are they?"

To that, Solas responded with an agreeing snort. He glanced up at the stars. "I wonder then where the balance between wallowing and learning is?" asked Solas.

"I doubt that has an easy answer, or one at all. All I know is that those who try to recreate the past perfectly are bound for failure, disappointment, or misery." Lavellan glanced at him still watching the stars.

"And if their attempts to recreate the past is perhaps a way of fixing their mistake?"

Blood, pain, tears, anger. The sky fell. This was a pyrrhic victory.

“They’ve traded an old mistake for a new one then. Over and over it goes on. A loop.”

Solas leaned back against the hillside. “And if the past is truly better than the present? Objectively, without idealism or romanticism, what if that past world was indeed better?”

Lavellan traced the hem of his sleeves. He imaged it, Elvhenan. It *had* been beautiful, expansive, magical. Compared to the shitshow that was this age, and even the ones before, Lavellan knew Elvhenan sounded better in comparison for the elves. Not only that. Existence then had likely been different. A different state of awareness, a higher level of sense.

“See what made it better I suppose. See what made it worse or just as bad. Be the change you want to see within your realm of ability.” Was Lavellan just unwittingly encouraging Solas again with his answers? “The past can be learned from but it can’t be brought back. Shouldn’t. Besides, the world is always changing. Our actions now might help shape an even better future.” Even as he said it, he knew Solas wouldn’t listen. This existence was lesser to him. He who had lived most of his life co-existing with the Fade and whatever that past world had been.

“You are very idealistic,” said Solas.

Lavellan smiled ruefully. “Cynicism exhausted me.”

Solas laughed, the sound mellow from sleepiness.

“But you said you know things about the ancient elves that the Dalish do not,” Lavellan said. “I’m sorry you were shunned, but if it helps, I hope you don’t mind me asking about it.”

“Hm, no, quite the opposite. My stories and knowledge are yours.” *The Dread Wolf must favour you, sharing his stories like this.*

Lavellan thought on it. Where to begin? Of course, he knew quite a few things already, but there was one he would never tire of.

He closed his eyes, whispered, “Tell me of Arlathan.”

“Where love dwells,” Solas whispered back. “Envision isles amidst the clouds and evenings lit by crystal shards.”

He told them so gently, so carefully, as if he was folding fragments of himself within his words, his melodic narrations sweetening the night. Lavellan’s eyes turned heavy.

When the sun rose over the hills and plains, two elves slept side by side after the lullabies of ancient stories, serene and quiet, the melancholy of the past momentarily forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Puns as a coping mechanism! Fun!

Solas' "Envision isles amidst the clouds and evenings lit by crystal shards" line can be sung to the first bit of Hallelujah - a little tribute to how Patrick Weekes sometimes writes Solas' dialogue in Hallelujah cadence.

[1] **Ma laim:** You are lost [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Dirtharal junua em. Din nadas:** Seeking the truth will hurt you. The end is inevitable [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Banalas!:** I reject this [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Harem himem harellan:** The deceived became the deceiver [\[↑\]](#)

[5] **Palahna em:** Try me [\[↑\]](#)

[6] **Is elem:** He might [\[↑\]](#)

Foul-weather friends

Chapter Notes

CW: Panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

beware what lurks within the mist—

They had done good work in the Hinterlands. All the rifts were closed, all the bandits taken care of, and there was now an extensive network of support for the locals and refugees. They'd repurposed abandoned strongholds and the villa into shelters or medical hubs, and construction of the sentry watchtowers were well under way.

Bull and Blackwall had major contributions to the construction efforts, Varric helped small businesses set themselves up or stabilised previous ones, Sera left hidden surprises in people's homes — extra food, extra blankets, extra supplies, taken from old hideouts. Solas helped other mages with their healing efforts, Cassandra helped with the training of raw recruits who wished to join the Inquisition, and Lavellan oversaw and managed things. Occasionally hunted, helped wherever he could.

As for the Therinfal situation, so far, they had eight out of ten Orlesian noble houses allied with them and the remaining two had yet to answer.

Despite the good news, Lavellan grew more restless. The longer they waited, the greater the number of Templars succumbing to red lyrium.

It wasn't until the end of the week that the gate to Redcliffe opened.

Cassandra hovered around him with her arms crossed and her brows furrowed as he prepared to depart.

"I am accompanying you," she announced. No room for objections. "It may be a trap. Or it may not be. It is foolish to let you go alone."

She was as immovable as the Frostback Mountains when she was like this, so he relented.

"Alright," he agreed. "Thank you for your concern."

Bull sidled up beside her and rested his arm on her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

"I'm coming too," said Bull.

Lavellan laughed. "You're going to scare them."

He grunted. "Good. That's the point. If anyone even thinks of doing anything suspicious, I'll make them think twice. Or not even think about it at all. That works for me too."

"So I have two scary bodyguards?"

“Three,” said Solas from behind him. Lavellan started, but the reaction was slight. He'd been less jumpy around Solas lately, so that was good. Bull was alright too. He was an old hurt, still sharp, but more softened.

But it was Dorian who had made the killing blow.

Lavellan shook himself out of it.

“No offence Solas, but you're not very scary,” said Bull.

Solas stared at him. “No? I am a mage who fights in a manner that they would be unfamiliar with.”

“If you stopped at ‘I am a mage,’ I would've still accepted it.”

Lavellan shot them a warning look. “We're not there to fight, but alright. I suppose there's no swaying any of you out of it?”

“No,” they answered in unison.

“Fine,” he sighed. “Do try and behave.”

They made their way to Redcliffe, the silence occasionally being filled with stilted conversation, all of them still getting accustomed to one another. When they neared Redcliffe, Solas and Lavellan fell quiet.

The Veil was strange here. It was clustered in places, barely hanging by a thread in others, like paper scrunched and straightened. You could see where the creases were, where the pinched points were.

Having sensed the sudden shift in atmosphere, Cassandra and Bull stopped conversing.

“Solas?” Lavellan called out behind him. “Is it just me or is the Veil strange?”

“No,” he replied, voice tight. “It is not just you.”

“Something feels weird alright,” said Bull.

Lavellan felt the pull of a rift, but this was strange too. Where was it?

They followed the road and met an Inquisition scout, sprinting and frantic. She collided against Lavellan and he staggered, steadied both of them. Her shoulders were shaking.

“Demons,” she gasped. “Just in front of the Redcliffe gate. It's not behaving right. I was going to go get reinforcements.”

Lavellan nodded. “I'll seal it. Is there anybody injured?”

“We've got two unconscious and we moved them away from the fighting.”

“Alright. Go get the medics instead.”

He sent her off and they drew their weapons. They arrived at the Redcliffe rift. Flickering rings of green or yellow lights were scattered around it and the Veil was erratic here, even more so than with an ordinary Fade rift. What was this?

Think later, demons first.

They dove into battle. Lavellan tore through the shades overwhelming an Inquisition scout.

“Heads up, Mercy!”

Bull hurled a shade at him and Lavellan pierced it with both daggers, shoved it off and aside.

Lavellan evaded a wisp that a wraith flung his way. In his haste, he hadn't realised that he'd stepped foot within one of the green circles.

His body slowed, felt as if he were wading through tar.

A cloud of green swirled beneath him. Terrors. Shit!

He ran for the edge of the circle. Too slow.

“Solas!” he called out. “Hit me!” He wasn't sure where Solas was, didn't even know if he would hear Lavellan, but restrained Fade energy hit and flung him out of the circle. His body shuddered from the impact as he got up. The Terror was standing where Lavellan had been. It was moving slowly too.

Weird.

Cassandra situated herself on the edge of one of the yellow circles and her slashes quickened.

Very weird.

The Terror in the green circle prepared to burrow again and another Terror did the same. Green swirled beneath Lavellan.

He leapt out the way as both Terrors sprung from where he'd been. The idiot demons crashed into one other and they lay stunned on the ground.

Lavellan breathed. Time to try something.

He held his hand out, felt the Veil.

Sundered it.

Green sparked above the Terrors, crackled. Burst. Fire raced up his arm and he gasped.

The sunder materialised as a small orb, paralysing the two Terrors and tearing them apart, forcing their fragments back into the Fade until none remained. He stopped holding the Veil open and the sunder closed.

Lavellan ignored the pain in his arm and turned to the rift, closed it. Once it closed, the rings on the ground vanished.

That left them in the silence of the aftermath.

Then, “What the *shit* was that?” Bull asked.

Solas joined them, frowning. “I believe the rift warped pockets of time around it. However—” he directed that frown at Lavellan— “*you* opened a rift. What did you do?”

“It— It wasn't a rift. Rifts feel different. They tear the Veil by pulling from the sides. I punched a hole through it more like, and it sucked the demons back into the Fade. Like stabbing a piece of

paper with a stick. The edges of the hole curl towards the direction of the stab.” He shook his hand out and made a face. “Hurts like a bitch too.”

Lost and cold and desperate after he'd fallen from the avalanche in Haven, demons had attacked him in the caverns. He'd sundered the Veil in his bid to live. Lavellan had forgotten how much it hurt though.

Bull grunted. “I’m really not liking the sound of anything going on here.”

“We’ll have to look into it,” Lavellan agreed.

The portcullis opened. They shared a look, then pressed forward.

“Indentured to Tevinter?” Bull shook his head. “They’ve really gone and done it.”

Lavellan stared at the letter in his hand, handed to him by Magister Alexius’ son when he'd feigned weakness.

“Shall we go to the Chantry then?” he asked.

“That could be a trap,” said Cassandra.

“Or an answer.” This was *strange*. Fiona didn’t even recall meeting them at Val Royeaux and when the hell did this Magister Alexius swoop in? The Inquisition had been a presence here for weeks. Surely they would have heard. Then again, Redcliffe had locked itself away. The name rang a bell though. Alexius... Alexius...

Dorian had mentioned a mentor by that name, hadn't he? This was likely that same Alexius then, which meant that time magic was somehow involved. The rift at the gate was damning enough.

Lavellan tucked the letter into his inner pocket and stood. “Come on. If going to the Chantry turns out to be a trap then at least we have a chance of surviving. Not going at all means we lose the chance of finding an explanation.”

“Certainly an optimistic way of looking at it,” said Solas.

“You would march there anyway,” Cassandra muttered. “It would be better if we came with you to increase your likelihood of surviving since you love your odds so much.”

“All my risks are sensible,” he protested.

“Yes,” said Solas. “Such as sundering the Veil without knowing of its consequences.”

Well, he *did*. “He gets it. Let’s go scary bodyguards.”

They left for the Chantry and Lavellan took a moment to examine Redcliffe. The atmosphere was uneasy, as if awaiting a fall that may or may not come. The Veil was strange here too. Weakened, then patched, but not truly strengthened, like slapping a plank of wood over a hole.

When they reached the Chantry, the Anchor flared.

“Get ready,” he warned and they drew their weapons. Lavellan shouldered the door open and got a face full of demons.

“Oh good! You’re here,” chirped a familiar voice. “Would appreciate it if you closed this!”

There in the middle of the Chantry, battering demons with his staff and his spells, was one Dorian Pavus.

They leapt into battle. There were green and yellow rings on the ground. Lavellan used it to their advantage and lured demons into the slow circles while Solas stood in a yellow circle to double the output of his spells.

With the last of the demons defeated, Lavellan closed the rift. Green sparks showered him as he turned to finally meet Dorian again.

The man certainly knew how to do flashy introductions, he’d give him that.

Dorian was a tad more youthful, hair short once more. They had shared one too many drunken nights wailing about their stupid, traitorous exes and making a complete mess of wherever they were in their misery. Dorian had also spat a minute-long stream of curses at Solas when they’d crossed paths at a ball in Minrathous. Lavellan had felt utterly vindicated.

He’d also been a husk from the continuous lack of sleep in the past, had been perpetually low on mana because he’d had to use magic continuously to sustain himself. Yet he’d pushed on. Had wanted to fight beside Lavellan for the final confrontation.

“If I’m going to die, I may as well go spectacularly. I refuse to die in my sleep! How mortifying.” Dorian’s joking expression fell, darkened into a threat. “I want to look that mad fool in the eye and show him he can try to kill us as much as he wants and we’ll keep coming back. Like pests and weeds.”

Well, who was Lavellan to deny such a request?

“Fascinating,” murmured Dorian, gaze on Lavellan’s hand. “Do you know how that works?”

“Somewhat,” said Lavellan. “Like a lock and key. It can be one or the other, even both at the same time.” Solas looked at him strangely and Lavellan cleared his throat. That may have sounded too knowledgeable. “Something like that anyway. Sometimes I can punch holes in the Veil and get certain people pissy.” Solas’ expression soured. “So, mind sharing who you are?”

“Oh, certainly. Got ahead of myself.” He gave a small yet overexaggerated bow and Lavellan’s lips twitched. “Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?”

“Watch yourself,” said Bull, narrowed his eye. “The pretty ones are always the worst.”

“Bull, if you’re trying to be insulting, try not calling him pretty,” Lavellan suggested.

“I meant it in an insulting way.”

Lavellan noted the day. *Friday, 9:41 Dragon, Bull called Dorian pretty as an insult.*

“Right,” said Lavellan. “Dorian, help me add a few things up. I arrive at Redcliffe and see a rift that distorts time and makes the Veil feel like an abandoned scrap of scrunched paper. Weird! Very well, maybe Grand Enchanter Fiona can help? No! She hasn’t even heard of us.” Lavellan clasped his hands behind his back and paced. “And in comes Magister Alexius telling us the rebel mages

are now indentured to Tevinter. Great!” He stopped and clapped his hands. “And comes his son sending me cryptic notes directing me towards another Tevinter mage. Either the stew I ate this morning had something questionable in it or things really are shitting up.”

Cassandra sighed behind him and Dorian’s grin squinted his eyes.

“I’m afraid eating the questionable stew would have been more preferable,” said Dorian. “Only a little vomiting, a little nausea.” His smile faded and his expression turned troubled. “It is as you say. All those strange set of events? Alexius distorted time to accomplish them.”

Cassandra crossed her arms. “You expect us to believe that?”

“*You* saw the rifts, didn’t you? It sped time, it slowed time. It’s only limited to Redcliffe for now, but soon there will be more. Further from Redcliffe, until it spreads all over southern Thedas.” He shook his head, leaned on his staff. “Magic this unstable? It could very well unravel the world.”

Bull grumbled to himself and settled himself on one of the toppled pews. “A hole in the sky and time travel. What’s next?”

“An archdemon,” Lavellan said dryly. Well, sort of.

Bull threw his head back and groaned. “Well now there *will* be because you said it, Mercy.” Oh, he was going to *hate* Lavellan when he sees Corypheus’ dragon.

“You are asking us to take on a lot of faith,” said Cassandra.

Dorian scowled. “*I know* what I’m talking about. I apprenticed under Alexius, I helped develop this magic, but it never worked. It was pure theory.” He stroked his chin in thought. “But what I don’t understand is why he would go through such trouble just for a few hundred lackeys.”

“He didn’t do it for them,” said a foreign voice.

Cassandra’s sword was already drawn by the time the newcomer had come into view. Lavellan eased her hand down. Felix Alexius joined them, grim-faced.

Dorian clapped him on the back. “Took you long enough. Did he get suspicious?”

Felix shook his head. “No, but maybe I shouldn’t have played the illness card. It was hard convincing him to leave my side.” He turned to Lavellan and his companions with a small tip of his head. “I’m sorry for the short notice and the lack of explanation, but we needed help. We didn’t know who else to turn to. The Inquisition seemed the only organisation interested in stopping the madness happening.”

“Are you implying this strange incidence is connected to the Conclave and the Breach?” asked Cassandra, sword lowered but not truly relaxed.

“I’ve thought about it, but if it’s true, then it’s even worse than I thought.” It may have been pretence earlier that he was ill, but that didn’t negate the existence of an illness. He was pallid, even in the dim light of the Chantry. Felix... Where had he heard that name before? Had Dorian mentioned him? “My father joined a Tevinter supremacist group called the Venatori. And I can tell you this: the things he did, he’s done to get to the Herald.”

The Venatori. Of course it was the bloody fucking Venatori. Then this was related to Corypheus.

Lavellan counted on his fingers as he listed, “A Blight ten years ago, a hole in the sky, a war

between Templars and mages, the death of the Divine, time magic, and now cultists." *And the rise of an Elvhen god as well as Lavellan's death and time travel!* "Thedas is not having a good time."

"Well it's a good thing we're here to try and make things less of a tragedy," said Dorian.

"Or are you here to add to it?" asked Bull.

Dorian shot a sunny smile at Bull. "Suspicious friends you have."

"Just in case you stab us when we're not looking and use our blood to power up an insane ritual."

"Says the Qunari spy," said Lavellan.

"Hey, at least I *admitted* it."

Lavellan considered Felix. Dorian, he trusted, but he wasn't sure what to make of Felix. "In any case, Felix, why tell us this? Why go against your father?"

Felix's small sigh was almost inaudible and yet it was heavy. He suddenly looked older than he was. "I love my country and I love my father. But this? This is madness." He met Lavellan's gaze, eyes drained yet determined. "It is exactly because I love him that I want to stop him. I cannot watch him lose himself. Will not."

The words tore visceral memories out and the world collapsed around Lavellan.

"We still stop Solas," he declared. "By any means necessary."

He was furious.

"You're like a star," Cole said, blue eyes the colour of a hidden glacier. "Sharp, shaking, shattering. Your gaze is bright and blinding, burning yourself and the space around you. You want to blind him too. The shadows come when your light fades and they fill the ashes but where does that leave you?"

His companions continued with the interrogation but their voices faded as the seconds passed and the seconds became years and he was before the Exalted Council. Orlais was the sycophant drowning him, Fereldan the hounds mauling him. Lavellan was angry. Inside of him, it festered, pressing up against the boundaries of himself. He didn't want to be here. Not when everything was raw and his arm didn't move right and the remnants of pain was still crawling over his shoulders, stinging at his jaw.

*He'd saved all of them. Every single Maker-damned one of them even when he hadn't asked for it. They repaid him with their simpering, their disdain, their indifference. I should have let all of you **burn**.*

He dropped the thick writ on the floor and relished the shocked silence its heavy fall caused.

"Now if you'll excuse me," he said and walked off. "I have a world to save. Again."

Solas would see the world razed for his precious empire? Fine, Lavellan would rally against him with all he had.

So Solas was a god? Very well then, Lavellan would become wrath incarnate.

Rage was all he had.

Metal flooded his mouth. Thick and rushed up his throat, up and up and up from the hole in his heart.

It was here and now was then. But when was then and which was now?

His heart swelled and shrivelled all at once and no, he didn't want to be rage or wrath or fury. It had hollowed him. He didn't want to be a shattering star. He didn't want to be the saviour of the world. He just wanted to be Mahanon. But who was Mahanon supposed to be and did Mahanon even exist?

Please, please, I don't want to be gone. Don't let me be a statue carrying bowls of fire, watching the weeping prostrate before me.

I want to be me.

I want to be not this. Let me fade in peace.

"I am here. You are here," murmured a voice. Lavellan latched onto it. There was a peculiar sound by his ear. Blocks of wood hitting each other.

"Where is here?" he whispered back. *Please, give me answers.*

"Do you smell incense?"

Incense? Lavellan took a shaky breath but there was only metal. He trembled. "No. Metal."

Clack.

There were other voices but they were beyond a wall of suffocation and water. His hand reached. Something. *Anything, gods, just—*

Something warm wrapped around it. Lavellan squeezed, released a shuddery exhale when it remained solid and stable and *there*. In his hand.

"...urgent... Return... Excuse us." It was the same voice. Lilted, sombre, melodious, carrying the weight of almost-forgotten sins. "Mahanon? You're holding my hand, and I am going to lead you out. What's your name?"

"Mahanon."

"Very good. Can you see the door in front of you?"

It was there, a central point in his tunneled vision. "Yes."

"Will you touch it?"

Lavellan held his unoccupied hand up to it. Sanded, lacquered. Heavy and solid.

"Very good. Will you push it open? Be careful, it may be considerably brighter outside."

He heeded the request and pushed, his muscles waking. Light slipped between the widening gap and there was a brief period where the world was white before it all returned, little by little. The sky was blue, and he could smell the water, hear the call of merchants, the ambient chatters. Birds flew from the trees, patches of green at the forefront. Sunlight warmed his skin. Lavellan took a breath, still trembling, but there was no metal in his nose. Only the water, the trees.

Every step he took brought him further back into the present.

After a while of silence, the dulcet voice asked again, "Where are you?"

"Here."

"Where is here?"

Lavellan saw the docks they'd arrived at, saw the small boats, the water. He recalled the time magic, the rifts, the indenture to Tevinter, Dorian, Felix, Venatori.

"Redcliffe village."

"Well done."

They sat on a wooden bench near the docks. Lavellan knew whose hand he was holding but he didn't want to look. Couldn't. Not yet. So he watched the water, watched the gulls.

"What's your name?"

"Mahanon."

"Of which clan?"

"Lavellan."

"Very good." He sounded so gentle. Patient. Lavellan licked his bottom lip and tasted blood, had bitten it in his distress. "Do you know who I am?"

Lavellan fiddled with the edges of his coat. "Solas."

"Yes."

He didn't let go of Solas' hand, as if the world would collapse again if he did. There was something ironic in that sentiment, somewhere.

Lavellan wasn't sure how long they stayed like that. At one point, he took out the stone from Haven and let its weight rest in his other hand, waited until his extremities ceased shaking. He watched as two young boys raced each other on their small boats.

After more time, he finally mustered the courage to look at Solas. He was watching the race between the two boys with detached amusement.

"He is going to fall," said Solas.

Lavellan blinked, then watched as well. One of the boys was paddling harder to catch up, but he was rocking his small boat too much. It was in danger of capsizing. But...

"Maybe not," said Lavellan.

"No? He is rocking too much, and his friend's paddling has turned the water turbulent ahead of him. He best retreat lest he capsize."

Yes, but the boy was also learning. His off-sync rowing gained a steadier rhythm until he wasn't rocking the boat so much.

“He found his balance in the turbulence,” Lavellan said. The boy crowed with victory and settled into his rhythm, flying over the rough waters. “He’s won.”

Sure enough, he caught up to his friend and surpassed him. Lavellan leaned back smugly against the stone wall behind the bench they were sitting on.

The boy’s friend fell in the water instead and a surprised laugh escaped Lavellan. What a twist. The victorious boy returned though, cackling, and offered a hand to his friend. They returned to the docks together on the boat, tugging the capsized boat behind them by a rope.

He grinned at Solas. “Told you. He learned.”

Solas sighed, but smiled as well. “So it seems.”

Their hands were still clasped. Lavellan wasn’t sure how that made him feel. It was a warm, clammy hold, courtesy of Lavellan’s sweaty palms. He eased his grip. Solas followed course and so, his hand was free, cooling from the wind.

“I’m sorry,” Lavellan mumbled again. “Thank you.”

Solas leaned his staff against the bench and angled his body to face Lavellan.

“What triggered it?” he asked.

Lavellan’s head was fuzzy. “I’m not sure. I can’t remember. Felix was speaking and then... Oh piss, Felix! We just left and there were important things to discuss—”

Solas eased him back. “Stay. Cassandra and the Iron Bull are still there. They are capable enough on their own.”

He paled. Did everyone see him like this? He sat back and buried his head in his hands, clutching at his hair.

“Did they see me utterly lose my shit?”

“You did not,” said Solas with a vehemence that surprised him. “Mahanon, there are traumatic experiences which can displace your balance and shock you, manifesting in ways you cannot control or even comprehend. There is nothing to apologise for.”

“I—” he started, but Solas’ eyes were set, blazing as if he were in another of his impassioned arguments. Lavellan still couldn’t place what he was feeling. “Thank you,” he settled on instead of deciphering the emotions tangled up within him.

Solas nodded and some of the passion eased. “And to answer your question, the Iron Bull noticed something was amiss. I suspect Cassandra as well. I cannot be sure of our new Tevinter friends.”

“How did they take our sudden departure?”

“I said something urgent has come up. That is all. It is none of their business otherwise.”

Lavellan bit his lip but it was sore and it reopened the cut he’d made. He muttered a curse. Gods, he was exhausted.

“I need to write to Leliana about this interesting turn of events,” said Lavellan. “Let’s meet up with Cassandra and Bull again.”

“You can still take a few moments, if you’d like.”

“No, I’m—I’ve calmed down. I can think again, thank you. Focusing on our current situation helps me press forward.”

Solas pressed his lips into a considering line, before he stood and took his staff. “Very well. I told them we will meet them at the tavern.”

They walked back and Lavellan felt like a new bruise, tender to the touch, wrecked and tired. Or perhaps that was the lack of sleep. Maybe he could take a nap later.

“You do not seem shaken at the possibility of time travel,” said Solas.

“There’s a hole in the sky and I saw the rifts distorting time. I can hardly draw the line at time travel.” This could enlighten him about his situation. Time travel was possible, he had it confirmed, but what were its adverse effects? How did it work? Did it erase the future he’d been a part of? Were certain events fixed? Had he woken up in a reality not his own? So many implications.

“This fascinates you,” Solas observed.

Lavellan smiled. It was small, but more sincere. A victory that he’d take.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Your eyes gain a certain gleam when you fall silent in thought.”

He did? “Is that a bad thing?”

“On the contrary.” Solas smiled. “I quite enjoy it.”

Lavellan paused. Warmth curled within his chest — a gentle flame, not the conflagration of fury. Yet it never took much to begin a wildfire. He just wasn’t sure what kind of wildfire this was.

“You enjoy me being quiet or the gleam in my eyes?” he asked.

Solas fell quiet and sped up.

“Hey, hey Solas, wait! You like it when I shut up or you like it when I think? Argh, both of those sound highly unflattering.”

Solas chuckled.

Bull and Cassandra met up with them in the tavern as agreed. Before they could begin their discussion, Bull disappeared briefly and came back with a tankard that Lavellan assumed was ale, until he set it in front of Lavellan. He frowned at Bull.

But Bull sidled in his seat without mentioning it and lapsed into a recount of what Lavellan had missed. Cassandra contributed, and the normalcy they attempted to maintain made Lavellan teary for other reasons. He sipped at the mug. Just plain water. He clutched at it, otherwise he’d cry. Cassandra stood up at some point and came back with a warm bowl of soup that she placed in front of him. For him.

It smelled nice.

Lavellan cried.

Chapter End Notes

Somebody give this poor boy a hug or some warm blankets because lord knows I'm not going to

No salvation within these walls

Chapter Notes

It's red lyrium future time! You know what that means?

Angst! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

rail against the destined—

They had the ten Orlesian houses.

They also received a grand invitation from Magister Alexius, addressed personally to Lavellan, to come to Redcliffe Castle tomorrow to *negotiate* regarding the mages' fate.

"It's a trap," said Lavellan, didn't bother reading the rest of the overblown letter. He threw the letter on top of the other letters of confirmation from the ten Orlesian houses for the Therinfal campaign. He looked up at his advisors. "How immediately can we get the Orlesian houses to Therinfal?"

"It will likely be a day's journey," said Josephine.

He looked at Leliana. "How fast can your birds fly?"

"Fast," she said. "They will have any message you wish to send today. And we've warned them to be ready at a moment's notice."

"Good. Because they're leaving today."

Josephine stared at him. "You plan to set them on the same day? What if Redcliffe goes wrong?"

"Which is why we send a number of Inquisition representatives," he said and turned to Cassandra. "Will you lead them, Seeker?"

"*Me?*" she asked. "No, I will accompany you to Redcliffe."

He shook his head. "You have ties with the Templars. Maybe the Lord Seeker won't listen to you, but he does not represent the other Templars. Remember, the nobles are there to apply pressure, and you being there applies even more. I'm sending Madame Vivienne with you as well as Sera, Blackwall, and Varric."

She frowned. "Vivienne I understand, and perhaps even Blackwall. Why Sera and Varric?"

Lavellan grinned. "A dash of chaos." Yes, but he also needed them there so they could later withstand the battle against the Red Templars, not to mention the Envy demon.

This time, he'd be ready.

But that was Therinfal. He had no idea what to expect from Redcliffe.

“Now remains the problem with Redcliffe,” said Cullen, scowling. “We know it’s a trap, but Redcliffe Castle is defensible. It has never fallen despite the thousands of assaults it has endured. We cannot possibly breach it.”

Lavellan shook his head. “No, we can’t. We’ve declared for no one, but if you’re going to split hairs — which politicians love doing — we’re technically an Orlesian organisation. If this *Orlesian* organisation’s forces marched right into Ferelden? That’s asking for war. We’re already dealing with one, I’d rather not start another, thank you.”

“He is correct,” sighed Josephine. The candle on her board had burned low. Her hair was as neat as ever, but there were slight shadows beneath her eyes. “But if we do not respond to this magister, we will have a hostile foreign power on our doorstep.”

“Well, Mahanon can’t just walk in!” Cullen protested.

“Not without a present, I can’t,” said Lavellan, and an idea sparked. “Something like... agents of the Inquisition infiltrating the castle while I gather all his attention and forces on me.”

“You want to be bait?” asked Cullen.

“I make for a very good bait.”

“Wait,” said Leliana. “There’s a hidden passage in the castle. An escape route for the family.”

The idea slowly came together. “We send your agents through it,” Lavellan said.

“That’s a big risk,” said Cullen.

Josephine groaned. “We never get anywhere with you.”

“I’m being *cautious*.”

The door burst open and Dorian strode in as if he were the Maker’s greatest gift to mankind, a breathless soldier following closely behind. Poor thing. Dorian was a maelstrom when he had his mind set.

“This man says he has information against the Magister, Commander,” huffed the soldier. The advisors eyed Dorian. Cullen nodded at the soldier in dismissal.

“Pardon me, I couldn’t help but overhear,” said Dorian. “Something about an infiltration?”

“Thinking of sneaking spies in through a hidden passage,” said Lavellan. “Thoughts?”

“They’ll fry themselves and alert Alexius, and you either die or something worse. A joyous, momentous occasion for everybody involved. Fortunately, you have me. I can dismantle those wards without a cinch! So, naturally, I’m tagging along.”

Cassandra glowered. “You cannot just invite yourself.”

“I just did.”

Lavellan cut in before they could argue. “In the event that something goes wrong with the hidden passage, I think it wise for me to have back-up.”

“Who did you have in mind?” asked Cullen.

“The giant Qunari,” said Lavellan. He’d already worked the logistics out last night. “And our resident apostate.” There was something ridiculously hilarious about the fact that the people he would bring to guard his back were the ones who had betrayed him. Fucking ridiculous. But for now, the Qun demanded for Bull to be here and help them, and so, Lavellan would take full advantage of that. Bull was a good fighter. It wasn’t in either’s best interests to off Lavellan so early.

“Solas?” asked Cassandra.

“I’m sending you and Varric to Therinfal so there goes two people who I feel comfortable with in a fight. Solas has been fighting with us since the first day. I’ve gotten used to his fighting style and how we work together. If things sour, I’ll be more at ease.” Lavellan shrugged. “Besides, I like his barriers.”

She considered that. “His... barriers.”

“Can you tell?” asked Dorian.

“Yes,” he said, then came up with a half-truth. “My sister is a mage. She used to practice her barriers on me so I can tell when the barrier quality is good.” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Right, we’ve got our plans.” Lavellan outlined everybody’s roles and tasks and asked to increase the forces for Therinfal, disguised it as uneasiness from the nobles’ lack of martial prowess.

Cullen gave him a look. “And you? You’ll be in the most danger with this plan. We cannot, in good conscience, order you to do this.”

Lavellan smiled at him gravely. “Commander, I’m volunteering.”

It went to shit. Of course it went to shit. That was the summary of his life.

They'd met with Alexius, as agreed, but when the ruse fell apart, Alexius attempted... something. Lavellan wasn't sure what. Alexius had opened a strange rift with his amulet which had sucked Lavellan and Dorian into it. Lavellan had a feeling that the only reason they were alive was because Dorian had interfered with the spell.

For now, though, they were no longer in the throne room.

Lavellan kicked the Venatori guard off his daggers and their corpse fell with a splash into the waters of the flooded cell they were now in. Large lyrium crystals had infested the walls, growing in corners like cursed cobwebs, bathing the cell with a red glow. Discordant harmonies echoed in his head. He rummaged through the dead Venatori's coat and pulled out a key.

“What did you do to the amulet?” he asked Dorian.

“I’m not even sure where to start with that question,” he said. “Think of it this way: I threw a rock at a knife headed towards a target. The knife may have missed the target but it sure hit something else.” He glanced around them. “We passed through a temporal rift, it seems. I’m just not sure where it’s taken us.” Lavellan unlocked the cell with the key. He examined the stone of the walls.

“Old Fereldan architecture,” said Lavellan. “We’re likely still in the castle.”

Dorian hummed in agreement. “If it’s not a matter of where...”

“Then it's a matter of when."

“You seem awfully calm about all this.”

He shrugged. “I do the panicking inside. More efficient. Let’s look around, see if we can figure out how to get back. Somehow.”

“I was going to say something heroic. Impressive, even. Something like, ‘Don’t worry, I will protect you,’” he said and chuckled. “But you’re not even boggled by the notion of time travelling.”

“I still appreciate the sentiment.”

So the temporal displacements were somehow connected to the Fade. He supposed all magic was connected to the Fade, but this was different, as if it had employed the Fade’s ever-changing nature as its own force instead of shaping the energy into something else. Not that he could ask Dorian. Explaining why Lavellan knew so much about the Fade required too much time they didn’t have. He doubted he could blame it on his sister this time.

They trawled through what seemed to be the castle’s dungeons. Red lyrium was bursting from the walls, shrouding the space with an eerie, red light, blocking a few passages. The red lyrium’s elegy drifted beneath the Well’s whispers, like blood diffusing in water.

“Alexius made quite the mess,” said Dorian with a slight grimace.

“Are you alright?” Lavellan asked. “These give you a headache, right?”

“I’ll be better when we find out what’s going on. This is hardly an improvement from the tackiest carvings of wolves and dogs that filled this place.”

They arrived at a cavernous room with a raised metal grate as a platform, suspended from the ceiling by great chains. There were two doors on either side and one ahead, but the walkway to that was raised. It was a perilous drop below. There were four Venatori guards stationed in the room.

Despite being outnumbered, Lavellan and Dorian still emerged victorious.

“Shall we go left first?" asked Lavellan.

Dorian glanced around him with detached interest. “No, I was wondering if we could perhaps spread a blanket here. Have some finger treats. Tiny pastries, maybe?”

“Bottle of wine, cheese wedges, wicker basket.”

“So long as it isn’t goat cheese. Goat cheese disagrees with my delicate digestion.”

Lavellan shook his head with a smile and they explored the left door. More stairs, more cells. Most were empty. Red lyrium had overtaken some of the cells, had bent the metal of the bars until he wasn’t sure where metal ended and lyrium began. Dorian tapped one of the crystals with the end of his staff.

“What exactly are we looking for?” asked Dorian.

“A way forward I suppose. Or something to tell us what’s going—”

“Who’s there?” gasped a small, struggling voice.

Lavellan stopped.

Then, slowly approached the furthest cell.

Grand Enchanter Fiona looked up, made a shuddering noise while Lavellan made a strangled one. His stomach churned. Red lyrium. Around her. Rather, *from* her. Her skin puckered where it grew, the cloth of her robes assimilating with the mineral. Her lower body may as well be completely lyrium.

She had the look of someone on the verge of tears but could never cry because she'd spent her tears and more.

“You’re alive,” she wheezed and leaned her head against the wall. It was the only thing she could do. The only thing she could move. “I saw you disappear.”

“Is red lyrium growing out of you?” Lavellan asked, bile in his throat.

Fiona whimpered. “Red lyrium is poison. The longer you spend around it, the more you become it, and when you die, they harvest your corpse for more.”

Lavellan wasn’t sure whether he wanted to stab Corypheus or vomit on him. He'd seen the red lyrium victims in Emprise du Lion, humans turned to living mines, but he'd never seen the actual process since he'd happened upon their husked-out bodies already. This was...

Dorian closed his eyes, silent as he suppressed a shiver, but he made himself look back at Fiona.

“What is the date?” asked Dorian. “Please, it’s very important.”

“I’ve long lost track of the time, but I overheard one of the guards mention it was Harvestmere. 9:42.”

He balked. “A year and two months?”

“Can you stop this from happening?” Fiona asked. “Alexius serves a god. The Elder One. More powerful than the Maker. Nobody has challenged him and lived.”

Lavellan glowered. “Well then,” he said. “He’s about to get a nasty surprise.”

“The only way to get back is if we use Alexius’ amulet,” said Dorian. “I could make it open a rift at the exact place and it could maybe send us back.”

“Good,” said Fiona.

“I said maybe. It could also turn us into paste.”

“Try.” She took a shaky breath. “Your spymaster is here. And so were the two who accompanied you on the day of your... death.”

Dorian and Lavellan shared a look.

“Go,” she urged. “Before the Elder One finds out you’re here.”

Lavellan couldn't move, couldn't bear to leave her like this. She smiled softly.

"You cannot take me with you," she said, as if reading his mind. Though, he supposed it might be painted over his face instead. Fiona looked down. "If I may ask you for a favour? There is not much life left in me, if at all. I cannot move, I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot even weep." Her chuckle was raspy, broken. "Please. Will you see me through?"

"See you— Oh."

"I understand if it is a heavy request. Simply a favour for a woman who has lived too long and seen too much. I understand if you would prefer not to."

Lavellan clenched his fists, then relaxed. He unsheathed a dagger. The cell wasn't even locked. The smugness of that statement had him gripping the dagger tighter as he opened the door. Fiona smiled at him, eyes glimmering with unshed tears.

"Thank you," she said.

"I'm sorry." He gently held the back of her head, had done this plenty of times before. Mercy kills. "I promise it won't hurt."

"Pain no longer means anything to me," she said. "But I appreciate it."

Lavellan drove his dagger into her neck and severed her spinal cord.

He'd stopped believing in the Evanuris, or rather, had lost faith in them. Another part of him that he'd lost. But still, he murmured, "Falon'Din guide you."

After a moment of silence, he marched out the cell door.

"Let's find the others," Lavellan said. "I'd like to have a word with Magister Alexius."

Dorian was silent as he followed.

They searched the upper cells.

"Five hundred bottles of beer on the wall, five hundred bottles of beer," sang a deep and familiar yet distorted voice. "Take one down, pass it around—" Iron Bull turned when he heard footsteps and stopped short at the sight of them. Lavellan paled. Bull looked ill. Like Fiona, the energy of the red lyrium was lingering around him, but there were no crystals growing from his skin, no traces of the lyrium save for the red glow in his irises.

They stared at each other in dead silence.

"Four hundred and ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall?" offered Lavellan.

"What the fuck?" Bull turned around and faced the wall. "Great. The visions are starting. One... Two..." He turned back around. Lavellan and Dorian were still there. "Alright, I'll bite. You're supposed to be dead. You were there, then gone. Poof. Burn mark on the ground."

"We didn't die," said Dorian. "We were sent forward in time. This is our future."

Bull snarled at him. "Well this is *my present* and, in *my past*, I saw you both die."

"You've been poisoned by red lyrium?" Lavellan asked as he opened the door.

Bull stepped forward and Lavellan saw some of the veins around his neck glowing red.

“Yeah... This whole room was full, did you know? Every single one of us exposed to red lyrium so we can be living mines.” He laughed. His voice was *wrong*. “They all died. All but me.”

Lavellan tasted ash. “Solas?”

“I don’t know. We were separated. Probably dead.”

Shit, shit.

“Come with us,” said Dorian. “We’re going to fight Alexius.”

He scoffed. “Why? You wanna see the other tricks he’s learned?” He stared Dorian down. “Hey Vint, did you know your *future* is one where the Empress of Orlais died? The one where your mentor’s Elder One had an army of demons that he marched all across Thedas?” Ah. *That* demon army. Lavellan had seen the plans through Envy’s taunts but this? This was the reality. This was what it would have been if Corypheus had succeeded.

Dorian bristled. “And so we’re trying to stop it. Are you coming or are you going to spend the last, few miserable moments of your life snivelling in a cell?”

The Iron Bull gave Dorian a reassessing look, then grunted.

“Fine. Fight Alexius. I can get behind that.” Bull kicked open a cell door and grabbed an axe propped up against the wall. “Let’s get going.”

They returned to the cavernous room. The walkway to the northern door lowered and more Venatori guards poured through. They had a spellbinder among them. Bull cackled, ripped into the wave of soldiers while Lavellan unslung his bow and aimed at the spellbinder.

They spotted him.

He dodged the spell thrown his way.

Dorian hit the binder with electricity. Lavellan shot the arrow into the binder’s throat. Done.

Bull cursed, staggered, then fell. He leaned on his axe for support.

“Are you alright?” Lavellan sprinted over. There was a gash on Bull’s torso and it wasn’t deep, but a sheen of sweat had coated his skin. Lavellan put his hand on Bull’s forehead. His skin was cold. “Bull—”

“I’m *fine*. Just rusty.”

“You’re not. Shit, we shouldn’t have forced you to—”

“Mercy, I’m fine.” Lavellan faltered at the nickname and Bull gave him a steady look. “I want to fight. It’s the only thing I have left. Let me.”

And Lavellan couldn’t take that from him. He sighed.

“Alright,” he relented. “But you have to let Dorian patch you up.”

Bull grumbled.

Dorian hummed, unimpressed. "A little gratitude will do you good."

"Just do it."

Lavellan stood. "I'll search the other cells. Maybe I'll find Solas. Or Leliana."

"Don't get your hopes up," said Bull and Lavellan knew he didn't mean it to be cruel. It was kind, even.

"My expectations are always low," said Lavellan and he made his way to the other door, inspecting the cells. Solas couldn't be dead. He was Solas. Surely the red lyrium wouldn't have gotten to him so fast. He was so powerful. The blighted blade Lavellan had used to kill him was much more potent than this version of red lyrium.

Then again, Solas was still weakened from his slumber.

Lavellan chewed on his lip and opened the door.

And there, in the nearest cell, was Solas with his eyes closed, leaning against the wall. Red lyrium pulsed on the walls around him and for a heart-stopping moment, Lavellan feared the worst.

Until Solas opened his eyes and their gazes met.

They stayed like that for the longest time, staring at each other as the silence yawned.

An unimpressed huff left Solas.

"Ah, and which are you?" asked Solas. "Regret? Desire? Deceit, perhaps?" He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes again. "Or perhaps I have finally descended into madness."

A tumult of questions and emotions battled for attention in Lavellan's mind and he cycled through relief, terror, worry, anger. He unlocked Solas' cell.

Solas opened his eyes again, frowning.

"Not a demon," said Lavellan. "I am the very real deal, unfortunately for you. I'm sure you would have appreciated a hallucination better."

Solas stared.

Lavellan gripped the metal bars and tried again.

"I'm real," he affirmed. "Terrible for you because I come bearing responsibilities."

"I have grown weary of hoping, Mahanon," murmured Solas. "If you truly are him."

His voice was wrong too. It reverbed but not in a harmonious way, just a beat off, and never in one consistent area. Red shimmered in Solas' eyes and glowing lyrium veins had crawled over his shoulder and one side of his neck, resting beneath his jaw.

"How can I convince you?" asked Lavellan. "Would you like me to call Bull? We got him out. He can come swinging in and you two can bond over how both of you have glowing eyes now." His forced cheer came out choked. "Creators, Solas, don't make this any harder than it has to be."

Solas hung his head and they stayed like that for a beat longer. Eventually, Solas rose and took

hesitant steps towards him. Shambled more like. Lavellan clenched his fists, unease settling in him at the sight of Solas so broken. Where had the proud creature gone? What could have broken him so? How could he— Corypheus was a child! How could a child break a man who'd walked the path of death with his head raised and his heart hardened?

He reached his hand out and rested it on Lavellan's cheek. As if confirming that he was not a mirage, not an image conjured by a dying mind, not the Fade or red lyrium's doing or a demon's trick. Lavellan stayed still, let Solas search for whatever it was he was looking for in Lavellan's eyes.

"I saw you—" Solas dropped his hand and shook his head. "You were gone."

"Displaced in time," he explained because that was easier than addressing his rising pitch of fury. "We passed through a temporal rift, and now we're here. One year in the future."

"Can you reverse the process? You can return and obviate the events of the last year."

Lavellan gritted his teeth. His fury roared in his ears.

"How could you let him do this?" he ended up asking, almost hysteric. "I don't— You're more powerful than this, how could you have let him win?" He knew it was unfair. Solas did not have Fen'Harel's strength yet, but how could he fall to *Corypheus* of all people?

Solas made a disgruntled sound. "I beg your pardon. He has an army of demons! Did you expect me to last against that?"

"*You* had an army of demons," Lavellan snapped. "And spirits, and pretty much every single elf you could convince. You were *hell* to go up against but right now, I'm not sure which I prefer. This future, or yours? All I know is that I'm sick of you shits thinking you can bring back a glorious past at the cost of the present. *My* present. *Our* present." He grabbed Solas by the collar and slammed him against the metal bars. His hands shook. Everything in him shook. "I am *sick* of self-proclaimed gods thinking they know what's best for everyone. Never mind the actual sods living in the world they're stepping over, right?"

Solas was speechless. Ha! Look at that! The git was *speechless*. Perhaps the Maker was real if miracles like this could persist!

"Mahanon—" Solas took a moment, though it wasn't as long as Lavellan would have liked before understanding dawned on him. "You know," he breathed, eyes wide.

And just like that, whatever tense strings holding Lavellan up slackened and his fury left. He slumped, rested his head on Solas' shoulder.

"[Fen'Harel my ghilanal em](#)^[1]," he muttered with a dispirited laugh. "You're a bastard, I hope you know."

"How did you find out?"

Lavellan lifted his head, met Solas' gaze. Both so sorrowful. "Did you ever wonder why I took to the idea of time travel so well?"

Solas searched for the answers once more and Lavellan let him work it out.

His lips pursed. "You are from the future. A different future than this."

Lavellan stayed quiet.

“The man you said I reminded you of. Was he...?”

“You.” Lavellan smiled ruefully. “Fen’Harel, Solas, another name. Whichever was you, all of you hurt me.”

Solas looked away.

Lavellan stepped back, cold in the absence of his anger. “Come. We’re fighting Alexius. Then we’re going back to the past.”

“What will you do about me when you return?”

It was Lavellan’s turn to look away. “I thought about killing you.”

“Why have you not?”

He gave Solas a cold and bitter look.

“Because I’m not you.”

Bull and Dorian looked up once they returned. The gash on Bull’s torso seemed to be alright now. Lavellan walked over to the dead spellbinder, wrenched his staff off him, and shoved it at Solas’ chest without a word.

“Let’s find Leliana,” said Lavellan and walked.

“Are you alright?” asked Dorian.

“I’ll be better when we win.”

“Ha!” crowed Bull. “Well said. I’ve been listening, nothing better to do, and guards talk. Red should be nearby and— Solas, what’re you doing?”

Lavellan turned. Solas had produced something out of his pocket and was in the middle of... tying it to the staff. Lavellan’s mouth dried and a lump lodged in his throat. The small wooden blocks. Solas paused, trying to remember the next step.

“Over,” instructed Lavellan, heart sore. “Then through.”

Solas gave him a small smile and finished the knot.

“You don’t need to do that,” said Lavellan.

“What was the Dalish saying? May the Dread Wolf never hear your steps?” Solas asked. The blocks would warn that the Wolf was nearby, provide the time to escape.

Lavellan snorted, smile faint. “A little late for that.”

Dorian blinked. “Interesting.”

They continued through the castle.

Lavellan later heard a hard slap, followed by a cry of pain, and sprinted. He shouldered past the door and there Leliana was, held up by her hands, feet barely brushing the floor, her torturer pressing a knife into her throat. Lavellan drew his dagger. The torturer turned towards them in shock.

Leliana pulled herself up and wrapped her legs around her torturer's neck, didn't relent even as he struggled.

He slumped to the ground dead.

Lavellan sheathed his dagger. This woman terrified him.

"You're alive," she rasped. Her face was scarred, skin leathery, some wounds still fresh. He knew better than to ask and instead focused on setting her free with the key he'd found on the dead torturer.

"Sent forward in time," said Lavellan. "I'd explain but I suspect that'd bore you."

She retrieved her weapons from a chest in the corner. "I don't care for the explanation," she said. "You're after Alexius, I wager." He nodded. "Then he's likely holed himself up in his chambers. Let's go."

"You aren't curious at all about what happened?" asked Dorian.

"No." She scowled at Dorian and Lavellan. "This may not be real to you, but it was real to us. The things we faced, experienced? Real. Save your explanations."

"We didn't say that," Dorian protested.

"No, and you don't need to. This is some dark future you hope will never come to pass. You did not live through it. We're nothing but shadows to you."

Lavellan flinched minutely, glanced at Solas, who was already looking at him.

Nothing but shadows.

Lavellan pressed onwards with his heart in his throat.

They fought through the castle, entered the courtyard, and there, Lavellan finally witnessed the true extent of the damage Corypheus had wrought.

The sky was an emerald haze with slabs of stone and concrete suspended in the air, pulled towards the sky. The Veil around them was *wrong* too. Not torn, but hanging by a thread, littered with so many perforations that it was barely much of anything at all.

And the Breach was a devouring heart, the nucleus of a ravenous thing.

"It's everywhere," murmured Dorian.

Rifts and demons and Venatori swarmed them. He closed rift after rift after rift, and the Anchor began to sting.

Solas noticed Lavellan rubbing his hand after they weathered past the last wave.

“Are you alright?” asked Solas.

“Only you could bear the mark and live,” he echoed. “Also, I’d forgotten what a threat Corypheus was. I suppose you were still the bigger threat of the two. This, I will admit, wasn’t something I thought Corypheus could orchestrate.”

“Too weak?”

“Too uncreative.”

“Ah.” He stared at Lavellan’s hand. “I would ease it, but the red lyrium has bled into my magic. I fear the effects.”

“Last time you mixed red lyrium and your magic, things went to shit. So no, don’t try.”

Solas looked appalled. “I used red lyrium?”

“*You’re* offended?”

“Something must have gone wrong if I had resorted to red lyrium.”

Lavellan frowned. “Your orb broke.”

Solas stared at him. “Ah. Yes. That would do it.”

“Then you left without a word.” Lavellan smiled but it was hollow and he didn’t linger to catch Solas’ reaction. They pushed through the courtyard and re-entered the castle. Lavellan searched through the rooms until they happened upon Alexius’ chambers. Devoid of Alexius. His attention fell on the open book upon a table.

Lavellan examined it. “Alexius’ journal,” he told the group.

Dorian peered over Lavellan’s shoulder. “What does it say?”

He read through and summarised for the group. “He was trying to travel back in time, apparently before Felix’s caravan was attacked by... Darkspawn.” It all clicked. He looked at Dorian. “Felix is blighted?” Dorian’s grim expression was answer enough.

Lavellan remembered now. Felix. Shortly after arriving at Skyhold, Dorian had received a letter informing him of his friend’s death. It had been Felix. Lavellan clenched his fists and pressed forward.

“The Elder One wants Alexius to undo what happened at the Conclave, but since the time magic is made possible by the Breach, it can’t go back to a time when the Breach didn’t exist. The Elder One is angry and...” Lavellan paused at the passage, read it over again just to confirm. He looked up at his group. “And he’s coming. Here. To deal with Alexius. He’s holed himself up in the throne room.”

Lavellan couldn’t suppress his shiver. He didn’t want to face a Corypheus who had been successful. Somewhat. It seemed he still had no way into the Fade. But if the Breach was the thing making the time travel possible, then Lavellan was back to square one with his situation. Or perhaps whatever magic Alexius had used was inferior.

“Then we have to move fast,” said Leliana.

They pushed through. Dorian asked Leliana questions but she brushed him off. It reminded him of

Divine Victoria during her darker days and he resisted the urge to hug himself. This wasn't Leliana. Warden-Commander Tabris had brought up her concerns too when they'd met, fearing that she was losing Leliana.

What had happened to Tabris in this dark future?

Lavellan's Anchor flared when they neared the door. He could no longer rely on the Veil to tell him if any rifts were nearby.

They readied themselves as Lavellan kicked open the door.

Demons everywhere. There was a Venatori mage in the room too. Lavellan snuck up behind him and slashed the back of his knees.

"The Elder One will come for you!" he cried before Lavellan silenced him.

Something red fell out of his satchel as he toppled forward. Lavellan picked it up. Red lyrium? He pocketed it for later and took care of the demons and rifts. Once they finished, Lavellan took out the shard and handed it to Dorian.

"Found this on the Venatori. Thoughts?"

Dorian turned it over in his hand and looked at the large door at the end of the large hall. They approached it.

Lavellan studied the elaborate and convoluted swirling designs chiselled onto its surface, a pattern which made perfect sense to him but not to the non-elven. He ran his hands over the stone door.

"This is elven," he murmured.

"Yes," said Solas.

"How did he even get this here?" Dorian mumbled and noticed five spaces arrayed on the door. He placed the lyrium shard in one. It fit. "Ah! An elaborate lock with keys scattered about. Shall we go hunting?"

"No choice," said Lavellan. "We have to hurry."

They investigated the wings. It was a slog and a half, and the Venatori they encountered were persistent. Once they had the rest of the shards, they returned to the door. Dorian fiddled with it, occasionally being grumbled at by Bull, while Leliana and Solas hung back. Since Leliana didn't seem in the mood for conversation, Lavellan joined Solas.

They stood in an awkward silence, unsure of their dynamic now.

"I came here hoping to understand what forces led to me being sent back in time," said Lavellan. A futile effort to dispel the tension perhaps. "But it answers nothing. Alexius' time magic is only possible due to the Breach."

"Alexius comprehends time as the corporeal would. Remember, this world is unchanging. Time is not limited to the physical world, nor is it truly quantifiable. Something of your situation's magnitude, I suspect, is tied to the Fade and not a passage to it."

"Everything comes back to the Fade. Perhaps a result of your actions." Lavellan frowned. "You aren't from the future too, are you?"

Solas shook his head. “No.” Relief flooded him. Solas’ expression darkened. “The wolf puns,” he said. “You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“Yes. Did you enjoy them?”

“No.”

“Good.” Lavellan grinned. “Hey, what was up with the Fen’Harel questions after?”

“You started it.”

“Yes, but you were the one who began asking about what I would do with Fen’Harel’s favour. *Your* favour.”

Solas looked away, cleared his throat. “I wanted to get to know you.”

“You could have asked directly.”

“Yet your answer provided me with more insight into your person than any direct questions. And quite the intriguing answers you gave. I...” He paused, turned sombre. “I enjoyed speaking with you that night. I would have liked to engage you in more conversations of such a nature and instead...” He closed his eyes. And instead, it looked as if Lavellan had died.

Lavellan reached into his pocket and toyed with the stone that was miraculously still in it. “I enjoyed it too. I’d like to have more of them with you when I return.”

Solas’ fond smile squeezed Lavellan’s heart. “I would like that too.”

Dorian cursed Bull out and Leliana glowered at them for the racket.

“Will you tell me when you return?” Solas asked, voice soft.

Lavellan sat and leaned against the wall. “No.”

“Yet you won’t kill me.”

“No.”

Solas sat too and a stiff silence stretched between them. His next question tore Lavellan’s lungs out.

“How did it end?”

Lavellan focused on a tattered banner on the opposite wall. “I drove a blade into your heart. You did the same.”

“How grimly poetic.”

He laughed, the sound mild. It sounded poetic, perhaps tragically romantic, but it was neither of those. It was simply a waste.

“I drank from the Well of Sorrows,” Lavellan admitted.

Solas’ head whipped towards him. “I beg your pardon?”

“I drank from the Well of Sorrows,” he said again. “We backed Corypheus into a corner, and so he

sought it. We beat him to it.”

“You gave yourself into the service of an ancient elven god!”

“Word for word,” he muttered. “Yes. Mythal. I met her, you know. Infuriatingly cryptic. With your orb broken, you sought her out and absorbed her essence. So I *was* under the control of an Elvhen god.” He stared at Solas, chest constricting. “You.”

He recoiled as if Lavellan had struck him. Solas detested the notion of taking away someone’s free will and their thoughts, and yet...

Lavellan was hurting. Lavellan was aching. So he wrenched the metaphorical knife deeper. “You made me kill Cassandra.”

Another uneasy silence followed, before a soft, broken noise left Solas and he buried his face in his hands. Lavellan hadn’t realised there were tears falling over his own cheeks and he wiped them away, stared at the drops on his fingertips with faint amusement.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Solas.

“What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I don’t know.”

Lavellan’s next breaths shook as an ugly sob tried to claw its way out his throat. He laughed but it caught on his breaths.

“I want to hate you,” Lavellan said.

“You should.”

“I don’t.”

The glow of the door caught his attention and Lavellan stood, hurriedly wiping the tears. Solas stood as well. If the red lyrium hadn’t worn him down already, then Lavellan’s revelations certainly would have. There was no satisfaction though. It was hollow.

“Done,” said Dorian. “Is everyone ready?”

Lavellan shattered his pain and used the fragments to reassemble his armour and coat his daggers and arrows.

“Let’s greet Alexius hello,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

And off Lavellan goes. Apparently, physically stabbing Solas wasn't enough.

On another note: for this fic, I'll be exploring and writing about the racial oppression and inequality experienced by the elves in the DA universe and it would be wrong of me to do so without acknowledging and addressing the same and very real issue happening right now with the BLM movement. So, here's a link that lists some

petitions you can sign for free:

<https://blacklivesmatters.carrd.co/#petitions>

Stay safe and informed, practice empathy, never be afraid to change your views in light of new information.

Translation

[1] **Fen'Harel my ghilanal em:** I've been deceived (lit. Fen'Harel has guided me) [\[1\]](#)

Melody of the damaged

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

laments of the savage—

No Venatori guards greeted them. No demons, no Fade rifts. Only a cold, large, and empty throne room absent of the actual throne. Alexius stood solitary, watching the flames in the large fireplace.

No, he wasn't quite solitary.

Felix sat crouched beside him.

Even as they approached, Alexius made no move to stop or face them, just remained unmoving. Lavellan would have thought him dead if not for the steady rise and fall of his shoulders. He glanced at Felix.

Felix was blank. Didn't acknowledge them, nothing, only stared straight ahead with glassy eyes.

"It's over, Alexius," said Lavellan. They were all tired.

"So it is," murmured Alexius. "I knew it was temporary. I knew you would be back but I never knew when." He bowed his head. "My final mistake."

"Was it worth it?" asked Dorian. "All of this? For what?"

"It doesn't matter now. All we can do is wait for the end. The Elder One comes for me for my failure. For you for your meddling. He will come for us all."

Lavellan gritted his teeth. "He is a false god, a pathetic embodiment of hubris, and you are a fool."

Alexius laughed bitterly. "Is this where you start singing praises of the Maker?"

"No. I'm not interested in the next world; I'm interested in this one. The one you allowed to be razed."

Leliana grabbed Felix and held him hostage, her knife over his throat. Alexius tensed, coiled tight in desperation as he reached for him, stopped when Leliana pressed the knife deeper. Felix didn't react. No better than a corpse.

"Felix," Alexius breathed.

"That's Felix?" asked Dorian. "Maker, what have you done?"

"He was going to die, Dorian," Alexius said and his voice cracked. Feeble. Tired. Alexius was a walking corpse too.

Dorian stared at Felix, face falling. "He's already dead," he whispered.

"Please," begged Alexius. "Let him go. I'll do whatever you want."

"Leliana," said Lavellan, voice terse. "Let Felix go. He's innocent."

And Leliana pinned him with the coldest stare of someone who was already a ghost. His stomach sank. It had been like this too, at the Valence cloister where he had bid her to let the Sister go. And she hadn't listened.

This time was no different.

"No one is innocent."

She slit Felix's throat.

Alexius' anguished cry and magic rent the air and blew them back.

A barrier coated Lavellan, familiar, yet off. Solas. He wasn't lying when he'd said that the red lyrium had bled into his magic.

Alexius lashed out at Leliana with a barrage of electricity and she deftly avoided them, arrows ready. Bull was their only close-combat fighter apart from Lavellan, but it was hard to pin Alexius down due to his Fade steps. Lavellan checked his arrows. Eight left.

Alexius holed himself up in an impenetrable barrier while he opened rifts and unleashed demons upon them. And attacked them with spells.

It was chaos and Lavellan couldn't see in front of him without running into a demon or being hit by fire and ice.

Amidst the melee, he found himself back to back with Solas.

"How's your strength?" Lavellan asked, slashed at a Shade, daggers slicked with black.

"Not ideal." He bashed a demon with his staff.

It wasn't going to work like this. They were getting overrun.

"Do you have a spell to drag enemies into a cluster and keep them there?" he asked. He wasn't sure how far along Solas was with regaining his strength, but if he could just manage this—

A stream of fire headed for them. Solas grabbed the back of Lavellan's coat and yanked him away. The fire caught on Solas' sleeves and he extinguished them with a hiss.

"I believe so," said Solas. "You have a plan?"

Lavellan nodded and pointed to a mob of demons overwhelming Bull and Leliana. "There. Can you exclude Bull and Leliana?"

"No time to doubt." Solas held his hand out and pulled back as if tugging on something.

A green cloud materialised overhead the mob and dragged them to it.

"Bull, Leliana, get away from there!" Lavellan ordered. They followed and Lavellan sundered the Veil. It devastated the cluster.

A furious flurry of pain shot through his arm. He grimaced.

The demons perished from the force. He closed the sunder and weathered through the discomfort.

Behind them, Alexius' barrier flickered and dropped and Leliana was there, firing a focused shot.

Alexius blocked it with a wall of ice.

A red magic circle flashed beneath Lavellan and the sudden heat was his only warning before the flames roared.

Solas cast a hasty barrier.

“I will deliver your hand to the Elder One!” hissed Alexius from wherever he'd hidden himself. “And I will throw your head at his feet.”

The fire wouldn't dwindle. Solas' barrier was brittle, spurred on last minute, and it wouldn't hold for long. Damn it, damn it! There were five of them and one of Alexius! Why was it so hard to keep him in one place?

Either way, he couldn't stay here and wait for the barrier to fall. Lavellan took a breath.

He leapt through the flames with his arms shielding his face. The heat seared and licked along his cheeks and his arms for a fraction of a second before he was out and rolling, extinguishing any patches of fire on his clothes. His arrows scattered all over the ground and he cursed, coat steaming.

His arms had taken the brunt of the flames but the coat had provided some protection. Still, they felt raw.

Alexius reappeared at the front of the throne room, ready to erect another barrier.

Leliana shot into his shoulder. Alexius staggered, but the loathing and despair raged within his eyes. He Fade-stepped.

Oh for fu— How?

Behind Lavellan.

Lavellan was too slow to move. Something hit the back of his head.

His vision stuttered, head flaring with a dull yet sharp pain. He fell, his arrows on the ground pressing into his already raw arms.

“—hanon!”

Alexius dragged him up and rested his staff's blade on Lavellan's neck.

His companions stopped.

His vision was still swimming and black spots danced over it. Dagger— Where were his daggers?

Lavellan moved. Alexius pressed the blade deeper in response.

“No one is innocent, you said?” Alexius rasped at Leliana.

She drew her bow, aim steady.

“No!” cried Dorian. “What are you doing? You'll hit him too!”

“Are you doubting my aim?”

“I’m doubting Alexius will keep him there when you shoot!”

“You’ve taken everything,” said Alexius. “There is nothing for me, so I will leave you with nothing. He is your hope and I will take it away.”

Lavellan did *not* come this far just to have his throat slit by a Tevinter magister.

He cursed at Alexius and flexed his left hand.

A sunder opened over them.

Bull and Solas tried to run towards him.

“No!” Lavellan cried out. “You’ll get caught in it!”

He grabbed Alexius’ staff, tried to wrench it away. Alexius struggled against him and the pull of the sunder.

Lavellan could feel the pull, too. Fighting against the force of it was likely easier for him because of the Anchor.

The pain in Lavellan’s left hand scraped his bones with a barbed arrow, coupling with the damaged skin rubbing against the material of his sleeves. He gritted his teeth so hard that he feared his jaw would crack.

Alexius wrestled the staff away from him.

His gaze fell on the arrow still in Alexius’ shoulder. It hadn’t gone through all the way because of the chain mail, but it had still entered flesh.

Lavellan reached, twisted, yanked it out.

Alexius screamed.

He grabbed the staff from Alexius.

The mark was molten heat within his veins. He couldn’t hold the sunder open for any longer.

Lavellan stabbed him in the throat.

Alexius choked over a silent cry.

Lavellan stepped back and let the sunder close, panting.

Silence descended and Alexius crumpled on the floor, clutching at his throat, but he was losing blood quickly. If he wouldn’t die from blood loss, then lack of air.

They were silent as Alexius uttered his final gurgles. He stopped struggling after the first few frantic seconds and collapsed on the floor. Closed his eyes.

His breaths stopped.

Dorian was the first to approach, tentative, as if Alexius would rise. But no. He would not, even if he could. There was a faint smile on Alexius’ lips. Dorian knelt beside him and sighed.

“He wanted to die,” he murmured, and whispered words underneath his breath. Perhaps rites.

Lavellan looked upon Alexius and his shoulders slumped.

He was never doing this for the Elder One or the return of old Tevinter.

It was all for Felix.

Lavellan bowed his head and murmured his own rites. That much he could give him.

His left hand pulsed with warm hurt. He glanced down at it and winced. Green had overtaken his veins, made them glow stark against his skin, angry and pulsing. It would be best if he didn't use it for a while.

Dorian took Alexius' amulet.

"Here it is," he said, usual exuberance gone. "Give me an hour and I'm sure I can come up with something."

"An hour?" Leliana said and shook her head vehemently. "*No*. You don't have that kind of time. You must go now!"

Lavellan cradled his hand to his chest. "Already?"

His answer came in the form of an earthquake and the unholy screech of Corypheus' dragon. Dust from the ceiling rained on them and stone fell from the weakened columns. They stared around them in apprehension.

"Yes, already," Leliana said. Had Lavellan blinked, he would have missed the hint of fear in her tone. "The Elder One is coming."

"You cannot stay here," said Solas from behind him.

"No," agreed Bull. Solas and Bull put a hand on Lavellan's shoulders and shared a look. Lavellan's stomach sank, already knew what was going through their head.

"We'll guard the door, deter them from reaching you," said Solas. "We will buy you time."

A panicked choke lurched up Lavellan's throat. "No— I'm not letting you die!"

"Mercy," Bull murmured, "we're already dead." He clapped Lavellan on the back. "For what it's worth, it was nice fighting beside you. Have a few drinks with past me, yeah? Tell him it's his shout."

He marched towards the door, unerring, fearless. No wonder Krem and the Chargers cherished him. He had a dependable back.

Dorian immediately set to work, muttering an impressive stream of curses over the amulet.

Solas curled his hand around Lavellan's nape and pressed their foreheads together.

"Solas, you idiot," he hissed but it was too full of hurt, too full of desperation, to be venomous enough. "Only I'm allowed to kill you."

He smiled. "Then return to the past and do not let this Elder One do it for you." He grabbed Lavellan's arms and eased the mild burns. "Upon your return, relay a message to myself. Tell him red lyrium is not a viable path."

Lavellan's confusion battled with his desperation and sorrow. "What?"

"I am sorry for all the pain I have caused, and all the pain I will cause." Solas moved away and Lavellan wanted to kiss him, as if that would make him stay.

Not that it ever did.

"I won't let you," Lavellan declared. "In the future, I won't let you. I'll stop you."

Solas' smile was sad yet resolute.

"Good."

He and the Iron Bull walked out the doors, and once it shut, the heaviness crushed Lavellan's ribs. Leliana gathered the arrows Lavellan had dropped earlier and calmly returned them to him. She met his gaze and nodded.

"Cast your spell. You have as much time as I have arrows."

"Well in that case—" He gave the arrows back. For a brief second, a glimmer of a smile pulled at her cracked lips. She took the arrows and stood in front of the door.

Lavellan retreated and stayed close to Dorian, eyes on the door. A thousand scenarios ran through his head. None of them good. His stomach churned, his hand hurt, and there was nothing but wretchedness filling his throat. The amulet hovered and green energy flickered around it.

For a dreadful moment, it was silent.

Then fighting.

Then a pounding at the door. More dust rained from the ceiling.

Leliana fetched an arrow, nocked it, movements relaxed.

"Though darkness closes, I am shielded by flame," she began and drew.

The door flung open and Lavellan paled at the stream of demons and Venatori trying to rush in. A large Terror dragged Iron Bull's corpse as if he weighed like air and threw him into the room carelessly. Lavellan's breath stuttered. He searched for Solas but the mob was too thick.

Leliana fired her arrows, picking at the front lines and felling them, calm as she murmured her Chants.

She ran out of arrows.

An arrow buried into her shoulder and she staggered back, crying out, but she pushed through. She rammed her bow into her enemies instead.

She wasn't going to make it.

Lavellan moved.

"Don't!" cried Dorian. "Move and we all die!" The green energy around the amulet strengthened.

He couldn't tear his eyes away, and any sound he could have made had died in his throat. One of the Venatori grabbed Leliana.

His and Leliana's gaze met across the room.

They slit her throat and she fell.

A rift opened and Lavellan jerked his head away, sprinted into it, eyes and heart and hand burning. The rift prickled as they passed, pulling and pushing him all at once, then dissipated in a blink.

He found himself back in the throne room absent of the demon mob and the corpses of his friends. They met Alexius' startled expression.

Lavellan called on his fury, his rage, but he had nothing left to give.

"Alexius, enough," he murmured. "I tire of this. Don't you?"

Alexius looked down with a defeated twist in his expression, fell to his knees.

Lavellan turned, made sure it was right, that it was alright, and there stood Solas and Bull. Confused, but alive. Uncorrupted by red lyrium. Whole and *alive* and Lavellan wanted to vomit all over again.

He turned back to Alexius because that was the only way he could flee. "Surrender. For Felix's sake if not your own. You don't have to keep doing this."

Alexius turned to Felix, beaten, as exhausted as Lavellan. "But he'll die."

Felix's expression softened and he knelt in front of his father, took his hand. "We all die. It's going to be alright, father."

They shared a moment and Lavellan let them. Dorian watched them, though he was still pale and clearly shaken from the future they'd seen. Lavellan doubted he looked any better. Alexius soon rose and let the Inquisition soldiers take him away. Lavellan breathed easier.

"Well, thank goodness that's over," muttered Dorian. "I was afraid he would refuse."

"I'd have knocked him out myself if he did."

"You wouldn't kill him?"

"No." Lavellan needed Alexius alive. He was the only one he knew who understood time magic the most.

Now came what they were here for. He turned to Grand Enchanter Fiona and was about to speak when soldiers marched into the room. He scrutinised their armour. Fereldan.

King Alistair Theirin strode inside, disgruntled, and Fiona sucked in a breath.

"Grand Enchanter," greeted Alistair, "imagine my surprise when I hear you've given Redcliffe castle over to a Tevinter Magister!" He noticed Lavellan and frowned.

Alistair and he had gotten along well enough when they'd finally met, but Lavellan doubted it would be the same for now given the strange circumstances.

Lavellan bowed instead. "Your Majesty," he greeted.

"I'm guessing you're the Herald of Andraste everyone's been talking about," he said.

“Let me guess,” said Lavellan dryly. “Tall elf?”

“Oh, no. Your, uh, hand’s glowing. Does it always do that?”

Lavellan looked down at it, blinked at the green of his veins and said, “Oh. Uh, no. It doesn’t.”

“Huh,” he said, but shook his head and returned his attention to Fiona with a sigh. “Look, I’ve tried my best to help you, really. But this?” His expression hardened. “You and your followers can no longer be welcome in Ferelden.”

Fiona’s face turned ashen. “Exile?” she asked. “But we have hundreds in need of protection. Some of them are still children. We have nowhere to go.”

“There is one place,” said Lavellan. He compartmentalised the shock from his future travel because there was another more urgent matter. Time was ticking. “Join the Inquisition.”

She frowned. “I see. And what are the terms of this arrangement?”

“A hell of a lot better than being indentured to Tevinter,” he said and sent a silent but not entirely apologetic apology to Vivienne for his next words. “The mages will fight as allies of the Inquisition. You will have protection, shelter, and since we have no affiliations with Ferelden, there will be no conflict regarding hospitality. Redcliffe castle returns to its rightful owner. Is that amenable to both of you?”

He caught Solas’ look across the room and wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Red lyrium is not a viable path.

What had Solas meant? It was a fair enough statement, but why that specifically? Path for what? Was he talking about his eventual pursuit of the lyrium idol?

“That’s a generous offer,” said Fiona, “but will the rest of the Inquisition honour it?”

“We cannot afford division. Not at a time like this. Be courteous, and I will ensure you are treated the same in return.”

Alistair crossed his arms. “Whether you accept the offer or not, remember you still have to leave my kingdom.”

Fiona sighed in defeat. “Then we accept. I promise, you will not regret the chance you’ve given us.”

“Glad to hear it. Make whatever preparations you need and we’ll meet again at Haven.” He hesitated, then said, “After this, we’re riding out to Therinfal. We may come back with some of the Templars.”

Her eyes widened.

“I promise I know what I’m doing,” said Lavellan. “And I want to be forthcoming. I’m sorry, I know this isn’t really a choice for you at this point, but I promise the Templars won’t touch you. So long as it goes both ways. Haven is a place of neutrality.”

“It is as you say,” she sighed. “It’s not much of a choice for us, but we will endure. We have gone through much, and lost many, so we are thankful that this is not another conscription disguised as a favour. We will do what we can, so long as we are in no imminent danger.”

“Only the hole in the sky,” he said, tried for levity.

Fiona smiled. “Then it's a good thing we're helping you with it.”

He much preferred this alive Fiona. He preferred an alive anyone, barring Corypheus and his overzealous lackeys. Dead false archdemons were also nice.

“Thank you, Fiona.” He turned to Alistair and bowed again. “Sorry to cut this short, but we have somewhere to be.”

Lavellan flew down the steps, nerves still fried yet overloaded, and he rode the momentum of his adrenaline before he could crash. He paused and looked back at Dorian, who seemed lost at the sudden turn of events.

“Hey,” Lavellan called, “want to come with us or depart with the mages?”

Dorian raised his brows. “Both of those options imply I'm remaining with the Inquisition.”

“If you want to return to Tevinter, we can arrange—”

“And miss out on the rustic charm of the South?” He waved a hand. “How dreadful. We can't have that.” He descended the steps and smiled at him. “Where to?”

“Templars. More fighting.”

“Yes, I suspected as much.”

They rushed to the stables where four horses waited along with an Inquisition scout. She saluted upon their arrival.

“Your Worship!” she said. “Here are the horses you requested,”

“Any developments?” he asked.

“The ten Houses are arrayed outside. The Lord Seeker is asking for you and refuses to open the gates for anybody else. Not even Seeker Pentaghast.”

Spectacular. “No news of pulling back?”

“None that I know of.”

Perfect. “Alright, everyone on. We're riding like the bloody wind.”

The news from Redcliffe wouldn't travel too fast, hopefully. The Inquisition had neutralised any Venatori influence, and even if a message had been sent to Therinfal, it would be too late.

As Bull and Dorian swung onto their saddles, Solas pulled him aside momentarily.

“One moment,” he said and examined Lavellan's hand, rubbing it soothingly. The pain eased, the angry green glow of his veins abating. Lavellan couldn't breathe. The secrets and the lies returned and he'd forgotten the burden of their weight, had been momentarily liberated by the admission of truth in the future where nothing and yet everything had been at stake.

Lavellan focused on his breathing.

“What happened? You look...” Solas' gaze raked over Lavellan. Oh, Creators. He must look like a

wreck.

“Long story,” he said. “The rift took us a year into the future.”

That stopped Solas.

“Future you told me to relay a message.” Lavellan extricated himself from Solas’ gentle grasp because it hurt far more than the mark ever could. “He said: red lyrium is not a viable path.”

Solas looked at him, tense. “I see,” he said. “Did he say anything else?”

He knew Solas was looking for evidence that his true identity may have slipped. Lavellan shook his head and *oh gods I can’t do this, I can’t do this, not again*. The secrets, the lies which slipped far too readily and easily—

“You sacrificed yourself,” he whispered because it was easier to pin his panic on that. “To buy us more time. I—” He gripped Solas’ shoulders. Solas was kind enough not to mention how hard Lavellan’s hands were trembling. “No more heroics. I can’t take it.”

“Have you perhaps tried taking your own advice?”

Lavellan gave him a shaky grin. “Me? Heroics? Don’t be preposterous!”

“Later, you have to elaborate on this future.”

“Later,” he lied. What was another lie on top of his other ones?

Who was the worse liar? The one who lied outright or the one who lied through omission?

Fuck, they were both terrible people.

They rode out of Redcliffe and Lavellan pretended that his shaking was from the impact of his horse’s legs hitting the ground. He patted the horse’s neck in apology as he urged it faster. They stopped halfway through to let the horses rest and regain strength.

Lavellan slipped away from the group and sought out a stream burbling nearby.

He stared at his reflection in the water and laughed brokenly at his appearance. Dust was coating his hair and face and there was a thin line of crusted blood on his neck where Alexius’ blade had rested.

Lavellan splashed his face and washed the dust from his hair. His hands were still shaking. At least the Anchor was behaved now and his veins were no longer aflame with green.

His wet hair fell over his eyes and he slicked it back. Should he cut it?

He almost laughed. He’d returned from the future *twice*, was about to confront a demon that would invade his mind and probe into the deepest recesses of it and no doubt come up with something dreadful, and all he could think about was the length of his hair? That had to be another level of vanity.

Everything was too fast.

Good. It had to be fast, otherwise, he would have another breakdown. No time for those.

Still, he had to wonder. How did time magic work? That dark future he’d seen, the future of

Corypheus' victory, did all of that return to where they were now? Or did he essentially throw an entire reality away to return it to its rightful state? Rightful. Lavellan looked down at his hands. Rightful state? The 'good' state? The 'best' state of reality?

"This isn't real to you," Leliana had said.

It was *their* present, and Lavellan just rushed in trying to wave it all away and gods he felt sick. His hands trembled anew.

There could have been other people who had made a life, somehow, in that horrid world. People who had found others and found solace with them, forged new connections, and maybe children had been born and Lavellan just... took it all away. Who was he to decide that that future was wrong?

Fuck. He splashed more water onto his face, staring at his fragmented reflection in the water, wavering from the ripples he'd created.

All the justifications he'd told himself, didn't they all sound exactly like Solas?

The bushes rustled behind him. He assumed from the lighter steps that it was Solas. It was always Solas when he was alone and conflicted like this because the universe despised Lavellan.

Where was the sound of wooden blocks?

Not Solas. He reached for his dagger and whirled.

"Vishante kaffas!"

Lavellan froze, blinked at Dorian who had his arms raised in front of him. Either in a placating manner or one of surrender.

"Oh. Hello."

"*Hello?* You almost impaled me! And not in a good way, mind you."

Lavellan sheathed his dagger. "Sorry. I was deep in thought and I'm... jumpy."

"Really? No, I thought you quite a docile creature!" Dorian's fake cheer was quick to dissolve. He sighed. "Oh, that's exhausting."

"Tell me about it." Lavellan mussed his hair and shook out the water droplets, tried to maintain a casual façade. "Was there something you needed?"

Dorian stared out into the distance in silence for a while. Lavellan waited for him to gather his thoughts.

"It's just— I told your companions what happened. The annoying oaf, Iron Bull? He called me a liar. Solas believed me, at least, but I suspect only because you've told him already. Some kernel of it. I just needed some fresh air, I suppose. Seek out the only other one who saw it."

Lavellan nodded. "No, I know what you mean."

He dipped his arms in the water and let it cool his skin. No burns. Healing magic of that magnitude must have been taxing, especially for Solas' state. He must have thrown his all into it, already expecting to die. Stupid, self-sacrificing wolf.

"I'm going to try and get the Templars next," said Lavellan. "I'm a little worried about the reception. My other companions waiting for us don't know what happened so I guess they'll be in for a bit of surprise." Keep talking, keep talking, push the unpleasantness away. No time. Simply no time.

"Considering you're returning with an extra mage."

"Madame Vivienne is going to adore you," he muttered.

"I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with her."

"You'll know her when you meet her."

Dorian joined him by the banks and washed his face and hair as well.

It was nice, for a while. Lavellan calmed somewhat. Dorian's presence had always pulled him away from whatever had been grieving him for that week. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend it was just like old times when he and Dorian would stay in the quiet in complete understanding, maybe sharing a drink or watching his servants (paid) scurrying about the manor.

"It would be so much easier, wouldn't it?" asked Dorian, eyes distant yet alert.

"What would?"

"If we had fallen in love with each other instead. Less drama. Not completely absent because I refuse to be devoid of entertainment even at my own expense."

Lavellan laughed faintly. "You're right. It would be easier." He propped his chin on his hand and his smile faded. "But we never take the easy road."

Dorian raised his glass and Lavellan clinked it with his. "To suffering on the difficult path."

"Cheers."

Dorian cleared his throat and brought Lavellan back into the present.

"I was wondering... You and Solas. Are you two...?" He gestured.

Lavellan watched the water lap over his wrists. He could still feel the nausea from realising that he essentially did what Solas had tried to do. And out of the two of them, Lavellan was the one who had succeeded.

"What makes you say that?" asked Lavellan.

"Watching your interactions."

"We're not together, if that's what you're asking."

"Very close friendship then?"

Lavellan did bark out a laugh then, a tad hysteric, and shook his head.

"Let's just say: he is a terrible idea," said Lavellan.

Dorian sighed. "They always are."

A thousand pasts and a thousand futures arrayed in his mind, fractals of a shattered mirror, all of them happy; tainted with melancholy. When he thought: *Solas*, it was sunlight and eclipses and hurt. And hope.

Ar lath.

Solas and *Fen'Harel* were a cluster of tangles wrapped so tight around Lavellan that they may as well be a part of him. Love, to him, to them both, was not what they wanted it to be.

It was a festering sickness.

Chapter End Notes

Hohoholy shit, that happened. Congrats Lavellan, you've successfully time travelled TWICE. Now it's off to the Templars and is this boy ever catching a break? (I don't know how to write action scenes but let's pretend I do).

In any case, I've written almost 200k words for this so when I say you'll want for nothing for a while, I mean it. Update schedule so far is twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Things to look forward to in future chapters: more dream sequences with the stupid wolf, soft Solavellan interactions, feral Solavellan interactions, and ominous elven mysteries afoot. Anyways, I'm excited.

Thank you for all the wonderful comments. My mental health has taken a swan dive during these past few months so writing this and reading your comments truly bring a little light into my life.

Away with the abscess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

the poison of excess—

There was a large commotion outside Therinfal Redoubt. All the Orlesian nobles in their extravagant dresses and their trademark masks had arrayed on the path to the Redoubt and they gasped as Lavellan and his group's horses thundered past.

He all but jumped off his horse in his haste and rushed up to where Varric, Sera, and Blackwall were.

"Hey chosen one," Sera greeted. "You look pissed. The mages give you a hard time?"

"Something like that," he huffed. "What's happened?"

"Apparently," said Varric, "a gaggle of nobles, an angry Seeker, and a vicious Senior Enchanter wasn't going to sway the Lord Seeker. When we mentioned you were coming, there was a *massive* change of heart. But only if you were here. Hey, you alright?"

"Absolutely not," he said and pushed forward before Varric could ask. No time for explanations. "Come on."

"We're coming?" asked Blackwall.

"I have a feeling I'll need you all there."

Therinfal loomed above them, the Templar banner swaying with the wind. He'd faced Envy before, knew what was going to happen soon, but there were newer things to prod at in his head. Newer hurts, newer pain. What would Envy do with them? Would it take them to Corypheus and show Lavellan's memories of the future so that Corypheus could work around it?

He shivered at the thought.

Cassandra and Vivienne were at the front, hassling a singled-out Templar. Meanwhile, other groups of nobles were pressuring the other Templars guarding outside the portcullis.

"Darling," greeted Vivienne. "It's a pleasure to meet you once more. I'm afraid we've both been too preoccupied to speak again after our initial meeting."

"I'm glad to see you were able to make it to Haven alright. And thank you for the connections you've shared with us. Greatly appreciated."

"Of course." She flicked her gaze over to Dorian and narrowed her eyes.

"What's the situation?" he asked to veer their attentions away. Dorian just got back from a future where his friend and mentor had died and was now about to be thrown into another shitstorm. The guy needed a break.

It was Cassandra who answered. "Now that you are here, they will finally open the gates."

“Good. Am I late?”

“We told them you were on your way an hour or two ago.”

He cursed in his head. He couldn’t allow the Lord Seeker to make his preparations. And Lavellan had been away for almost *two* hours?

“Open the gates!” he announced.

“Is he alright?” Blackwall asked behind him, though he suspected Blackwall was trying to be subtle.

“Long story,” said Dorian.

“And who’re you?”

“That’s a long story too.”

The gates opened and Ser Barris greeted them. Lavellan rushed past the conversation and skipped the entire flag ordeal. Last time, he'd raised the People’s flag high. If he tried to do that flag ceremony now, he feared he’d set fire to all of them just to prove a point that he thought this entire ceremony was something that the Envy demon had turned into a pile of shit.

It went like last time, but Knight Captain Denam seemed more hassled.

“Herald of Andraste,” he sneered, sickly behind his visor. Red Templars filed in behind them. “We had to move everything forward because of you.”

“I gave you almost two bloody hours,” he couldn’t help but snark. “Are you that inefficient?”

Denam snarled. Ser Barris’ asked questions, searched for answers, but Denam was too far gone. It didn’t matter. Lavellan studied Ser Barris. He had died defending the hall last time. This time, Lavellan would strive to save more people, including Ser Barris.

They fought Denam, detained him, and pushed through Therinfal, battling Red Templars left and right.

“Red lyrium! Wonderful!” said Dorian as he shoved the end of his staff into a Templar’s eyes.

“They’re monstrous!” cried Cassandra.

“Yes dear, we *noticed*,” snapped Vivienne.

A familiar hat occasionally flashed in his periphery and Lavellan pressed his lips in apprehension. Cole. Would he know everything once they meet? Would he see how he had betrayed Lavellan for Solas?

They scaled Therinfal until they finally reached Lord Seeker Lucius.

“Lord Seeker!” cried Cassandra. “What is this madness? What have you done?”

“I have ushered in a new era!” he proclaimed. “Come, Herald of Andraste. Let me know you.”

Lavellan grinned. He was fatigued, covered in blood, and positively feral.

“Come get me.”

He sprinted up the steps, daggers ready, ignored Cassandra's cries for him to wait. Envy held his hands out and wrapped them around Lavellan's head, slithering coldness clamping around his mind.

And his eyes opened to a world of twisted, swirling green. A parody of the waking world, fragments of it smashed into a distorted assemblage.

"Daring," purred the Envy demon's voice. "Very interesting."

Lavellan pushed through, ignored the burnt husk of bodies arrayed before him which mimicked the corpses at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

"And steadfast," continued Envy.

"Sick of you. How about that?"

"Mouthy," it grumbled.

Who would it impersonate this time to get to him? Last time it had been his advisors. He had trusted them, trusted their advice and input, and they had been his anchors in a world that was changing so violently.

The columns and burnt bodies faded into a forest.

Oh?

He journeyed into it. The more it stretched, the more it strained the demon. He must continue.

"Curious," noted Envy.

"Perhaps you're not as great at studying people as you think," he said.

"Incendiary."

"Hardly."

Was it wise to antagonise Envy this much?

He sensed a presence behind him. The forest floor crunched beneath their feet. Lavellan turned, expected Leliana, maybe Cullen or Josephine, maybe even Cassandra.

But he did not expect Solas.

Solas— No, *Envy* smiled.

"Will this let me know you?" it asked, threading Solas' voice with its own and Lavellan had had enough of demons and red lyrium distorting his voice.

"Come closer and we'll find out."

Envy tilted its head. It mimicked Lavellan's voice then cackled, walked around him.

"Being you will be so much more interesting than the Lord Seeker."

When it reappeared in his view, it had taken on Ellana's form. Lavellan glowered. She— No, *it* approached and gave him a perfect replica of Ellana pouting.

“You can tell me anything, you know that right?” it asked, voice a perfect mimicry. Lavellan drew his dagger and stabbed her through the stomach.

She gasped and lurched, tears springing to her eyes. “Why?” she wheezed and his heart wrenched but no, this wasn’t Ellana. Ellana was safe on the other side of the Waking Sea with the clan, burying her head in books and learning from the Keeper and advancing her magic and hopefully staying away from demons while she dreamt. “Oh Hanon, what have I ever done to deserve this?”

He stared it down.

Tar leaked from her mouth and trickled in long, thick strands. She grinned, viscous fluid between her teeth.

“Cold,” it whispered. “Ruthless. Staring your poor sister down and killing her like this?”

Strong arms wrapped around him from behind, a mockery of a tender embrace. Their voice hummed in his ear.

Lavellan tensed.

“How about this?”

That was Solas’ voice, he knew, but the tone of his voice was off and the frame behind him was broader, taller, the arms wrapped around Lavellan covered in ancient elven vambraces. Lavellan couldn’t breathe.

“Ah,” it murmured. “You *fear* him.”

Fen’Harel.

Ellana laid a gentle hand over his, the one with the dagger through her stomach.

“Does this hurt?” she asked. “Does it grip your heart so tight you cannot see?”

Ignore it, ignore *it*.

“Or perhaps,” joined another voice. Solas again, but in the form of the humble apostate. He approached Lavellan. Lavellan who was already trapped by the past, present, and future. “Perhaps it *burns*. Are you angry?”

“Get out,” he hissed. He tried to move, but Fen’Harel tightened his grip and Ellana took a step forward, let the blade sink deeper. Solas wrapped his hand around Lavellan’s throat.

Not good, not good—

“I can make it stop,” whispered Envy. “I can make the hurt stop. Let me be you, and I will remove it all.”

“Fuck. Off.”

They cackled, the sound ringing and echoing in his head. Solas tightened his grip. Lavellan pulled the dagger out of Ellana and stabbed into Solas’ wrist, tried to twist, but Solas wouldn’t move his hand. Fen’Harel dug his fingers into the sides of Lavellan’s ribs.

“There’s someone else here.”

Lavellan jerked his head at the sound of Cole's voice.

Envy-Solas frantically looked around. "Who was that? Get out of here!"

"A marble dropped in an ocean, caught in the currents, wants the ocean to obey but it won't happen. The ocean wants it gone. You're not as strong as you think you are."

"Get out, pest!"

Lavellan puzzled over the words. Ocean. There was someone else here? In his mind?

"The marble is crystal but everything breaks when the water presses. It's calling. The waves roar, rush, rasping ancient knuckles and you made a mistake. You took the forms of their blood. It doesn't like that you did. It thinks you're too loud."

He couldn't find Cole. Where was he?

"*Listen*," Cole urged.

So Lavellan closed his eyes and took a breath.

Whispers. Misty hands pressed up against the glass, shrieking, angered at the intrusion of such a greedy guest. The Well of Sorrows raged.

A marble. The Envy demon's world was a marble but there was ocean all around them.

Lavellan pressed his hands against the boundaries and strained for the whispers.

"They don't like you here," said Cole and the Envy demon shrieked, screeched, but Lavellan paid it no heed. He battered himself against the marble's casing, screaming, kicking, cracking its surface. The Envy demon tightened its hold but the waters heard his struggles and they were coming, swelling, taking up every space in the corners of his mind.

"[*Ma halani*](#)^[1]," he called out for the Well.

[*Ar'an amahn*](#)^[2].

The marble shattered.

Lavellan opened his eyes.

Envy had taken on Lavellan's form and Lavellan stared at this twisted double of himself. Fen'Harel, Solas, and Ellana turned on Envy, their eyes electric and blue.

Envy screeched. The world it had built crumbled under the force of the waves.

"What is this?" it asked, desperate. "This is *my* world! You can't—"

[*Vara*](#)^[3] said the Well through Fen'Harel, Solas, and Ellana, Lavellan's blood singing with the symphony of their Ancient voices.

Lavellan was finally free to move. He pulled his hand back, formed a fist.

"Hey Envy!"

Envy looked up.

Lavellan punched it.

His mind realigned with his body and he was back at Therinfal with the late afternoon sun blinding him, but there was no time for disorientation.

He slashed his daggers and wounded the Envy demon.

“Andraste’s tits!” swore Blackwall.

“Oh piss, piss, *piss* what is *that*?” asked Sera.

Envy crashed into the doors of the Great Hall, a gangly mess of limbs and contorting spines and patchworked skin, bleeding black tar from where Lavellan had cut it. It scrambled back, shrieking at him.

“Stop gawking and help him!” That was Dorian. Good old Dorian.

Arrows and spells followed the demon as it retreated but it erected a barrier at the front of the hall and retreated outside.

Lavellan clicked his tongue in annoyance. Ser Barris rushed in, stunned.

“The Lord Seeker—”

“No, Envy,” said Lavellan. “Gods, I’m sick of this.”

“Envy?” exclaimed Cassandra. “Then the Lord Seeker?”

Holed up somewhere but he kept quiet. Ser Barris shook his head.

“Dead or caged...” His armour clanked as he paced. “Maker, I knew that red stuff was wretched.”

“You think?” asked Varric.

“The commanders took it first. To show they were harmless. The demon corrupted our order without our realising.”

Lavellan gripped Barris’ pauldron and forced him to look up. “Will you take responsibility for this?” he asked. Ser Barris stared, adrift and hopeless for a moment, but his eyes turned resolute and he nodded in grim determination. Lavellan nodded back. “Then help finish it.”

Ser Barris straightened his back and addressed a Templar. “Templar! What is Envy?”

The Templar hissed, “A coward, brother!”

Ser Barris was quick to turn the despondency of his fellow Templars into fierce determination and fighting spirit. Lavellan gripped his daggers tight. He would not let Ser Barris die. He was one of the only good ones left, both in spirit and heart. He turned to Lavellan.

“We need our veterans. All our commanding officers have been turned but our lieutenants are likely still fighting. We’ll also need more lyrium to break through that barrier. We’ll hold the Hall. Please find the veterans and uncorrupted lyrium stores.” He gave them directions for the lyrium caches and likely areas where the lieutenants could be.

Lavellan turned to his companions, spying Cole in his periphery again.

Last time, it had all been a mad dash to help the veterans, defend the Hall, and find the lyrium. They had paid for it with death. He had tried to take it all on himself and look where that had gotten him. He had to rely on others.

He counted them. Nine of them altogether. Ten counting Cole.

He ran through the combinations in his mind quickly.

“Cassandra, Varric, Solas,” he said. “Help Ser Barris hold down the Hall.” Cassandra could weather through the toughest of fights and she could set the lyrium in someone’s blood on fire, Varric had a strategic eye and could lay out traps and plan manoeuvres, Solas was just as strategic and his support would boost the hardiness of the team.

For the lieutenants, heavy hitters. Fast and strong.

“Bull, Vivienne, Sera,” he said. “Find the lieutenants. They need to be here as soon as possible to help hold everything down. Once you’re done, stay and hold the Hall.”

All that was left was Blackwall and Dorian. He grinned at them. “You two are stuck with me looking for that lyrium cache.”

Blackwall chuckled. “Stop you from challenging more demons and going up in their face?”

“Very good,” he said.

“Wait,” said Solas. Lavellan turned and raised a brow, ignored how his stomach churned. Envy had known to use Solas. What did that say about Lavellan?

“Problem with the arrangements?” he asked.

Solas’ expression was tight and for a moment, Lavellan thought he really was about to argue.

But he shook his head. “No, never mind.”

With their duties in mind, they headed off. Solas threw him a lingering look and Lavellan had enough courage to return it. Solas looked away first and prepared. Lavellan frowned before his gaze finally locked onto Cole, who'd wanted Lavellan to see him.

Wanted Lavellan to let him know how to help.

He tipped his head towards the Hall and his companions. *Watch over them*, he thought and exited in search of the lyrium caches.

They fought through the Red Templars they encountered. They were more enduring, stronger, faster, the perfect hivemind soldiers.

The joke was on them. He had Blackwall. That man could outlast a dragon.

They soon discovered the plot to assassinate Empress Celene with Cole making a surprise appearance to elaborate. Afterwards, he canted his head at Lavellan.

“You see me,” he said.

“I do,” said Lavellan.

“Fascinating. What is he?” asked Dorian.

“Another helper.” Lavellan gave the blood-drawn eyes on the wall an unimpressed grimace. “I asked you to watch over my friends in the Hall.”

“They didn’t need me there,” he said. “So I went where I was. I know where they are. They sing, crystals from when the land breathed, veins and the colossus. There,” he said and pointed east, but his eyes kept staring at Lavellan, peering into the inner workings of his being. “You’re fractured, light slipping through cracks, keeping you together. But... the light’s not yours.” Was he talking about the Anchor? Cole's eyes widened. “No. You walk the shadows. You’re from before and you pressed against the curtains, called by the dying, despairing, downtrodden—” He gasped and stood from his perched position on the table. Lavellan stared up at him. Cole was so confusing. “Ravens,” was all he said before he was gone.

They stared at the space Cole used to occupy.

“What...?” asked Blackwall. “Wait. Why are we here?”

Dorian blinked, looked around. “Let’s not dawdle here, shall we? All this blood is making me homesick.”

But Lavellan remembered Cole, could not forget him. He once called Cole the Guardian of Skyhold and Lavellan didn’t understand. Why would Cole side with Solas? He was Compassion, he hated making others suffer needlessly, so *why*?

He shook his head. “East,” he said.

Cole was right. To the east of that room was a small storage shelter with boxes of uncorrupted lyrium on shelves.

“Alright, we need three boxes. Dorian, stack them on me and you two make sure I don’t get jumped by a Red Templar.” He paused. “Put an extra box.”

Dorian raised a brow as he stacked the boxes. “Why?”

“Just in case I drop one.”

“You increase the likelihood of dropping one by adding the burden.”

Lavellan shrugged. “I’m a strong boy.”

Dorian shook his head and stacked the final box. Their weight was bearable but he knew the longer he held them, the more he would strain. They moved through the courtyard quick, even spotted Bull, Sera, and Vivienne on a bridge above them.

A band of Red Templars ambushed them in one of the courtyards and there was Blackwall bashing shields with a Templar, Dorian with his deft spellcasting, and Lavellan scuttling like a Maker-damned crab while praying he wouldn’t get skewered *oh gods*. Of course, an arrow flew at him. He turned away in time and it hit one of the boxes instead, a scant few millimetres from his fingers.

Well. That was potentially damaged.

The Templar who had shot at him fell in a seizure of electricity.

Blackwall and Dorian dealt with the band and returned to Lavellan’s side. Dorian eyed the arrow.

“Told you we’ll need extra,” said Lavellan.

“Don’t get smug.”

They returned to the Great Hall, found Templar Behemoths parading around in the place, Cassandra hacking away with great zest and fury. There were more senior Templars here thanks to Vivienne, Sera, and Bull.

One of the Red Templars stepped foot in one of Varric’s traps and collapsed from the elemental capsules. Lightning.

Cassandra and Bull ripped into the larger enemies, Varric and Vivienne providing cover fire on a scaffolding. Any Red Templar who got it in their heads to climb the ladder met Vivienne’s spirit blade. Sera was in the thick of things, arrows flying everywhere but never missing, and Cole slipped in and out of awareness, helping where he could. Lavellan scanned the fight for Solas.

He was on the upper levels, keen eyes assessing the field and providing support.

Lavellan gestured for Dorian and Blackwall to help. He placed the lyrium boxes down and analysed the field.

He set to work on eliminating the opposition’s archers.

Once the wave diminished, Ser Barris and the Templars passed the lyrium around and consumed them. Lavellan looked on in vague discomfort. All he could see when he watched the blue clouds were Cullen’s tremors, breakdowns, pleas to be relieved from duty, and the repeated mantra of, *I can’t do this, Maker, I need to take it, I need it. Please, Inquisitor, don’t let me.*

But they worked. He couldn’t deny that.

While the Templars worked on taking the barrier down, the Inquisition kept the Red Templars off them as they rushed forward in waves.

A barrier coated him at one point. Wasn’t Solas. Too rigid, brittle. Vivienne then. Her barriers could damage enemies when they shattered, but he preferred the flexibility of Solas’. Was it strange for him to have a preferred barrier?

Lavellan suffered a blow to his gut during the fight and his lungs spasmed with the hit. He staggered. A red lyrium claw tore a gash down his leg then slapped him away.

His inner cheek cut on his teeth and he spat the blood out into the eyes of a Red Templar.

Lavellan refrained from using the sunder. He had to be careful. There was still Envy to take care of.

Once the wave finished, the Templars successfully took the barrier down. They cheered. His companions passed around healing potions and Solas walked over, pushed one to Lavellan’s chest and frowned at his leg. He ran his hand over it and the pain eased, skin stitching slowly.

“Solas, save your energy,” he said.

“That is your leg. I will not have you vaulting about like a hyperactive hare with a lacerated thigh.”

He sighed. “[Telsilelan^{\[4\]}](#).”

Solas gave him a pointed look which all but silenced any complaining Lavellan had. Mostly. He grumbled and took stock of his team’s state.

Cassandra had a cut on her forehead, Bull realigned his broken nose without fuss, Blackwall was miraculously untouched. Or maybe not miraculously. It was the beard, Lavellan swore. Varric and Vivienne were fine, so were Solas and Dorian. Sera had a bruise blooming on her cheek and a few shallow cuts on her sides, but other than that, alright. They were in various states of bloodstained.

Lavellan moved his thighs after Solas finished and thanked him, chugging the potion down.

“Alright,” he said as he rolled his shoulders. “I’m kicking that demon in the face. If you’re too injured or exhausted, stay here.” Not that any of them would. They were already readying their weapons by the time he’d finished talking. Lavellan smiled.

Ser Barris informed him that the Templars were in no state to continue, far too drained from taking down the barrier. Lavellan nodded and promised he’d bring him the demon’s head.

And off they went outside. It led to an open area, a shrine of sorts, and the Breach was an unsightly feature of the grey skies in the distance.

“No fair, no fair!” shrieked the Envy demon, wherever it was. “I never got to touch any of you. So selfish. You and them, those... shadows! Wouldn’t let me in. We are the same but you wouldn’t let me in! Now, I’m *no one*.” The demon surfaced from the ground, its limbs bent wrong.

“Dark and desperate, death to make yourself alive. I used to be like you.” Cole marched up to it, stared it down with fierce resolution. “I’m not anymore. You shouldn’t be either.”

Envy surged forwards with a cacophonous shriek towards Cole.

Lavellan dashed forward in a dance of blades. Red Templars scaled the walls and clambered towards the shrine.

He dodged Envy’s slash, kept retreating.

“Archers, to Envy!” he ordered. “If you see it start to burrow and there’s something suspicious under you, get out of its range!” He continued barking out orders as he fought. “Bull, with me! We’re hitting that damn demon where it hurts.”

"Hell yeah!"

Cole fought too, a whisper of a shadow, the refraction of light as it glinted off his blades. Cuts appeared on Envy’s skin where neither he nor Bull had slashed. The barrier around Lavellan would always come back up once it went down. Solas. It was embarrassing how much that pushed Lavellan to hit harder, be faster.

They gained ground, pushed back against the Red Templars. Blackwall rammed one over the wall.

Soon, Envy couldn't escape. Wherever it fled, someone awaited with steel, spell, or arrow.

It was Cole who made the final blow. Not that they would remember him, not yet.

Envy died screeching, grasping, flailing for what it could never have and could only hope to attain. The silence that followed was strange. It always was after a victory. This victory at least felt better than the one in Redcliffe.

Redcliffe. Wow, all that had really been within a day, huh?

It was night now. Only the braziers that the mages had lit and the rising moons lent them light.

"It is done," said Cassandra, sheathing her sword.

"Oh thank Andraste," sighed Dorian and he sat, leaning back against one of the statues.

"I'm going to need a bath. Maybe four," said Sera as she rubbed her arms. "Eugh. It bled all sticky."

Vivienne breathed heavily, leaned against her staff, closed her eyes to regain composure. Varric was laughing softly to himself, clapping Blackwall on the back.

"I need to get less crazy friends," said Varric.

"We *are* the less crazy friends," said Lavellan.

He looked for Solas. There he was, speaking with Cole. Nobody seemed to notice, too busy watching the stars or bathing in the afterglow of success, telling stories about what had happened even though they'd all been there to see it.

"I was on top of a wall! Then I saw the yellow circle, thought, 'Ah shit' and fell off," Varric retold.

"Yeah, right. Just say you tripped," said Bull.

"Mind repeating that? I know where you live."

"Yeah, it's almost like we all live in the same place."

"You know what I mean."

Lavellan smiled, chuckled as he got up and approached Solas and Cole. Solas turned to face him.

"I see you two have met," said Lavellan.

"Yes. It's fascinating. Cole appears to be a spirit in a human form. It is no possession, but he is able to be physical, while still drawing on his abilities as a spirit."

"I want to help," said Cole.

Lavellan's heart hurt again. He'd wanted to help. Did he think it would help to join Solas?

He was about to respond when the clanking of Templar armour approached. Ser Barris and what's left of Therinfal's Templars approached them, vaguely looking like children preparing for admonishment.

Lavellan steeled himself and met them.

"Thank you," said Ser Barris. "We are forever in your debt. Andraste be praised, she shielded you from the demon's touch."

It was mostly the ancient collective of long-dead elves residing in his mind.

Barris looked down, crushed, disappointment streaked across his features. "We've not much to offer. We have been corrupted, and our officers were either ignorant or complicit. Those of us here are forever in your debt." He straightened and drew himself together. "Whatever the Inquisition needs of us, we're ready to follow."

Lavellan regarded Barris, then the Templars behind him. They were lost now, nowhere to go. He

turned around and looked at the Breach in the distance.

Barris looked at it too and an understanding formed between them.

“You know what needs to be done,” said Lavellan. “You were corrupted, yes. Betrayed, overwhelmed, had fought those you used to be friends with, those you'd shared meals with.” A few of the Templars looked away, eyes glistening. A few held back strangled breaths, wouldn't let themselves weep. Not yet. Not until they were in the privacy of a dark room. “But you know what I also saw?”

He met Barris' eyes, met the Templars' eyes.

“I saw tenacity. Valour. It was painful, yet you were steadfast. I saw helping hands, camaraderie, loyalty.” Lavellan clasped his hands behind his back. “I would like to extend an alliance to you all. We will provide shelter, weapons, and supplies if you help with the Breach. If you choose to accept, just letting you know, we will also be expecting the rebel mages to join us at Haven.”

“I beg your pardon?” exploded Cassandra.

“Darling, are you feverish?” asked Vivienne.

Lavellan resisted sighing. “Haven is a place of neutrality. We are focused on stopping the Breach and restoring order. I want to give both groups and us time to rest, recuperate, and then I want to sit us all down and we're going to have a talk. Like good, civilised people. There won't be any explosions this time, hopefully.”

“Maker, this is actually happening,” whispered Varric behind him.

“Those are the terms,” said Lavellan. “Will you accept?”

This was the hard part. The Templars could still decline. Barris turned to his comrades and Lavellan couldn't read their faces.

“Templars!” cried Barris. “Do we accept?”

For a tense, crushing moment, there was dead silence as the Templars gave each other looks, uneasy, uncertain. Then—

They roared, put their fists out in agreement.

Lavellan almost collapsed in relief.

Chapter End Notes

Cole, my beloved. Still trying to find his voice but man, I love writing his dialogue.

Anyway, Lavellan's trying to do a Conclave 2.0 and hoping the only explosion he'll have to put up with is Vivienne yelling at the mages.

Translation

[1] **Ma halani:** Help me [\[1\]](#)

[2] **Ar'an amahn:** We (are) here [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Vara!:** Leave [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Telsilelan:** Worrier [\[↑\]](#)

Pedestal of salt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

remnants of a storm—

Who knew being yelled at for four hours would be a stressful experience?

Lavellan leaned against the doorframe of the Chantry doors and watched the mages and Templars' retreating backs, drained of everything. The talks had lasted for... honestly, he didn't know how long. Too long. Far, far too long.

But for now, they had an uneasy truce.

Cassandra stood beside him and watched them leave as well while the residents of Haven trailed their gazes after the Templars and mages, boggled, and turned those boggled stares to him.

"Why are they staring at me?" he asked.

"You do not realise it, do you?" Cassandra answered.

"Realise what?"

She gestured at the Chantry, her brows raised. "This? The talks between the Templars and mages? This is what Divine Justinia sought to accomplish with the Conclave. Unknowingly or not, you have continued her work."

Lavellan swept his gaze across the faithful, who were whispering to themselves, smiling, perhaps praising the Herald of Andraste for granting them peace.

All of this buried under ice.

"The legends of you grow further," Cassandra continued. "It was commendable."

He laughed. "Thank Josephine."

Cassandra clasped his shoulders and smiled.

"And thank you, too." She looked away, hurt flickering in her eyes. "I wish she could have been here to see it." She shook her head and the hurt in her eyes cleared. "I shall speak with you later. I need to assist Commander Cullen with ensuring the Templars have a place to stay."

He bid her goodbye and retreated into the warmth of the Chantry, but he found Vivienne scrutinising him, half hidden by the shadows cast by the braziers. She had been part of the talks too.

"And so, the Mage-Templar war has ended," she remarked.

"Are you angry?" he asked.

"Angry?" She paused and thought on it as she neared him. "No. Merely considering the consequences of the events you have set in motion."

“Are you worried about the lyrium supplies needed?” he asked. “The Chantry should have stockpiles, but we do need to provide for both groups. I’ll ask Josephine to open negotiations with the dwarves, maybe ask Varric if he has any contacts.”

Approval flashed in her eyes, quick to disperse like the steam hissing from newly formed ice.

“That,” she said and paced, “and the possibility that Abominations amongst the mages will increase. Even more so with the Veil damaged. Fortunately, you have the Templars now. Pray they will suffice.” Her face hardened and she stopped pacing. “No. Prayers will not be enough. Action, my dear. I suppose you’ve already covered these concerns during the talks, however.”

“Thank you for bringing them up, regardless. Everything must be considered. Our enemy is capable of terrible things and I don’t want to unwittingly aid this Elder One by being careless.”

She nodded. “Good.”

Lavellan was ready to crawl out his skin. Speaking to Madame Vivienne was like walking on a thin ledge and he had to use all of his concentration just to make sure he wouldn’t fall. He was ready to cut the conversation off there and retreat, but she wasn’t finished.

“What do you plan to do about the Chantry when this is over?” she asked.

He raised a brow. “That’s the Chantry’s business, not mine.”

“Darling, humility does not befit you, not when you are already shaking the very foundations of history. However this ends, you will undoubtedly have a say in it.”

“Is that so?” he asked. “And you’d like to have a say in it by influencing me, I suppose?”

She smiled. “Try as I might, you are steadfast.”

Steadfast, Envy had called him, and he repressed his shudder at the memory.

“I cannot influence you,” she said, “but I can ask you to consider. What future do you see for the Chantry?”

He looked outside once more, at Haven and those she was sheltering, those who were seeking a place for peace and hope.

“There’s... contentious history between the Chantry and the Dalish,” he answered. “The Chantry breeds fear rather than hope for some.” Lavellan crossed his arms and drummed his fingers on his bicep. “It fears what it doesn’t understand.”

“Are you talking about magic?” she asked.

“Not just magic, but yes. They say that magic exists to serve man, never to rule over him, but I don’t see mages in the Chantry. They’re making rules over what they don’t completely understand or have no perspective of.” He shook his head. “No, never mind.”

“No, continue. I’d like to hear this.”

When they'd first met, he had no idea what to think about the situation. He hadn't cared too much since he'd believed that the concerns of humans weren't theirs so long as it didn't affect the Dalish, but that was a dangerous line of thinking because that was when divisions formed. And when divisions formed, so did conflict. He had to care, this time.

Lavellan chewed on his lip. “My sister is a Dreamer. She is far more stubborn than me, so demons don’t tend to try to approach her because she isn’t susceptible. But the danger is still there. Growing up, I always feared for her. I couldn’t protect her in her dreams, and I never wanted to be the one to hunt her down if she became possessed. I wanted her to have a safe place. A place where she can learn magic safely. I trusted our Keeper and our mother, but still. I worried.”

“Of course, darling. It is as you say. Nobody would ever want to be the one to kill a loved one if they became Abominations. If you knew this, why did you not try to get her to a Circle?”

He scowled then. “The Circles as they are now is ineffective. The Templars have too much power over mages and it’s imbalanced and they’ve taken their actual duties too far. But at the end of the day, magic is a weapon. A tool. Dangerous, yes, but so is a sword if you’re waving it around like a halfwit. It needs training, which the Circle provides, but not subjugation, and not fear.”

Lavellan paused, resisted rubbing the back of his neck in discomfort. There went his mouth again.

“Anyway,” he said, “those are my thoughts on the matter. Right now, I’m focusing on the Breach and stopping this Elder One.”

Vivienne smiled at him. It wasn’t warm, but it was genuine. He wasn’t certain if that was a good or bad sign.

“Such interesting turns your mind takes,” was all she said. She was likely still sizing him up, and so was he.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said and nodded. “I’ll have to take my leave. The talks have exhausted me some.”

“Rest well then, darling.”

He walked away, head held high, and only relaxed once he was out of her sight. Always pulled taut around her. Lavellan shook himself out and got rid of the tension. There was still much left to do. He still had to find that damn cavern near the trebuchet. Maybe it was covered.

There was nobody around the trebuchet when he arrived. Good. Being seen crouching like a madman and digging around for caverns was the last thing he wanted.

He stood at the trebuchet, tried to recall what he did.

“If the avalanche was coming from up there...” He backed away from the trebuchet, away from the imaginary Corypheus. The force of the avalanche had flung him back and he’d fallen into the cavern, but what had revealed the opening in the first place? Did something collapse?

His gaze fell on a wooden platform nearby.

Lavellan knelt over it and knocked on the planks. The sound echoed. Hollow beneath. A draught drifted between the planks and he drew his dagger, pried one off.

He grinned at the dark space below.

Found it.

He dropped a rock into it to determine how far of a fall it was. The rock dropped after a few seconds, then skidded. Quite a fall then. Maybe he’d grab a rope and scout it out or even leave a rope hanging there if he didn’t have time and hide it so it wouldn’t get damaged during the

fighting.

“What are you doing?”

Lavellan jolted and almost dropped his dagger down the cavern. He put the plank back over it and looked over his shoulder at the speaker.

Cole sat on the rocks, legs swinging, head tilted as he watched Lavellan.

“Has anybody seen Cole?”

“Who?”

“Cole! You should remember him by— Forget it, I’ll look myself.”

Lavellan couldn’t help himself. All this talk of Solas and his army of demons and spirits had him worried.

“Hello Cole,” Lavellan greeted.

Cole looked at the wooden platform, then back at Lavellan.

“I don’t understand.” Lavellan didn’t. He truly, truly did not. “Cole, please—”

“You don’t have to,” he said.

Twice betrayed. Couldn’t do it three times over. Now he was just a fool.

“It’s not a betrayal. Cole never betrayed you. I am Compassion.”

“You can’t just— It doesn’t matter what you’re called, you’re still—” It hurt. Everything hurt. Everything hurt and he was angry. “Fine!” he barked. “Go then! Farewell, Compassion.”

Cole stopped swinging his legs. His eyes widened behind his curtain of blond hair and the brim of his hat.

“There’s so much hurt,” said Cole. “Buried, burrowing, bursting, and you brought it with you when the wheel turned back and made you the axle. Why did he do that?”

“Why did who do what?”

“Me. Him. I left. You were hurting and I left, and then you hurt even more.” He shook his head. “Why?”

Lavellan sheathed his daggers and stared at his boots. Why indeed. He had often wondered that himself.

“I don’t know, Cole.”

“You gave them your heart and they broke it,” murmured Cole, voice low. “The Wolf cradled it while he burned it, the Bull didn’t care after the hands told him to drop it, and I turned away. Why?”

“Well if you don’t know, then I don’t know either,” said Lavellan, masked how hard his heart was pumping just to overcome the crushing sensation surrounding his ribs.

“Ma vhenan, there is only death on this path. You want him to stop, you want him to stay, but you don’t think you’re enough. Why couldn’t you have left this be? Because I fight for this world just as you fight for yours. It’s deep but I can still see the bottom and it’s dark but the water is clear.”

Lavellan shook his head. “Cole, don’t. You’ll overwhelm yourself.”

“There’s so much.”

“Yes.”

His blue eyes cut into Lavellan and rubbed the wounds raw. “And you’re drowning. You see them all again and worry about your old mistakes. Then you worry that you make new mistakes by fixing old mistakes, and then you worry you’re no better.”

“Can’t tell if you’re talking about Solas or me.”

“You laugh to gasp for air but only water fills your lungs. You’re not set, you sway with whatever you’re called to be, and old shadows press into you, want you to wake up. Old spirits, old wounds, the hand of truth, the dagger of secrets. Shifting faces and he asked who you are— Wait.” Cole paused and Lavellan was lost. What was Cole seeing? “It’s ancient,” he murmured, dark and foreboding.

The Well of Sorrows tittered.

“Ignore it,” said Lavellan.

“I can’t.”

Worth a shot.

There had been a few disagreements when he’d let Cole stay, and honestly, Lavellan wasn’t sure why he’d agreed either. Why did he let Bull, Solas, and Cole in so close?

Right. Because he had a wretched heart.

“You can’t rip it out,” said Cole. “You’ll die. I won’t hurt you. I don’t want to.”

“You can’t promise that Cole.”

“I’m not him.”

Lavellan stared at Cole, who was so resolute and determined, fierce in his wisping way. This was Cole. Not Compassion. Well, they were both, but Compassion had shed its humanity while this Cole was still straddling the in-between.

Cole looked at the wooden platform where the cavern was.

“Cold, cracked, cloying. Smoke on your back and ice in your lungs. I can check underneath. Make it less painful, make you warm.”

He blinked at Cole, his heart softening from familiar fondness. “You’d do that?”

“It won’t be hard.”

“You’ll do it anyway,” said Lavellan with a warm smile.

“Probably.”

So Lavellan nodded. “Alright. I appreciate it. Thank you for trying to help.”

Cole stayed quiet, then tipped his head, hat hiding the rest of his face. Lavellan blinked and he was gone. But he remembered.

Speaking of preparations for inevitable treks through the cold, Lavellan swung by the blacksmith. Harritt dusted his hands off when he saw Lavellan.

“There you are,” he said. “Finished that armour you asked for.”

“You’re a champion.”

Harritt gestured him into his cabin where Lavellan’s armour rested on a table.

“Made good use of all that ram leather you got for us. Lined the inside of the coat with fennec fur as well. Should keep you warm. You sure you don’t want chainmail underneath? I know you got your mages with you, but it would give me peace of mind.”

Lavellan ran his hands over the coat. Nicely made as always. He’d never given Harritt enough credit, what with all the insane schematics for armour Lavellan had thrown his way. And not once had Harritt complained. Much. He’d always followed through, and his gear had seen them through many battles.

“Chainmail weighs me down,” said Lavellan. “But thanks for the suggestion.”

Harritt nodded. “Alright. Try it on. Let me know if something’s even a little bit off. Leave your old armour, I’ll see if I can scrap some parts.”

He left and gave Lavellan privacy while he tried on the armour. Lavellan stepped outside and nodded. It was significantly warmer.

Once Harritt gave it his approval, he returned to his work and Lavellan turned his gaze towards the soldiers training. Bull, Blackwall, Cullen, and Cassandra were with them.

Cassandra and Cullen were speaking with a few Templars while Bull and Blackwall were sparring.

Bull rammed into Blackwall’s shield but Blackwall stood his ground, skidded back a few inches. Lavellan approached and watched.

They stayed like that for a while. Bull pushed against the shield; Blackwall strained to keep Bull away. Then Bull would step back, roll his shoulders, and do it again and Lavellan raised a brow.

“What are you two up to?” he asked.

They separated and Bull grunted. “I wanted to run into something,” he explained. “Get rid of all that crap with the time magic and the demons.” He shuddered and grumbled, “Hated the demon the most.”

Lavellan shrugged. “It’s dead now.”

“That’s why I like you, Mercy. Always looking at the bright side of things. Nice gear by the way.”

Blackwall chuckled. “You do know we’ll probably face more demons?”

“This is why I don’t like you, Beady.”

“Beady.”

“It’s a work in progress. Varric already calls you Hero or something. Gotta knock you down a peg or two.”

Blackwall rammed into Bull and guffawed when Bull fell on his ass and groaned. Lavellan shook his head with a chuckle and left the two to it.

Two weeks. They would try to close the Breach in two weeks, and then Corypheus would come. There were preparations left to do. Cole was already helping Lavellan secure his escape, so his next concern was Haven’s evacuation. Chancellor Roderick was returning from Val Royeaux today so Lavellan had to find him and somehow steer the conversation to the path of escape. Once that was settled, they would have to mobilise the injured first with enough supplies to last the journey to Skyhold.

They also had to maintain trebuchets so that they would fire properly. They had more forces now because they had both the Templars and mages so there was more firepower, but how could he increase their survivability? Some of the mages were children or elderly too.

In the end, it all boiled down to a primary goal:

Try to save as many lives as possible.

His secondary concern was surviving the ordeal to lead the Inquisition and be there to help stop Corypheus while keeping Solas in check. Not that he was doing a spectacular job of it.

“For somebody who just accomplished what the Conclave couldn’t, you sure look miserable,” said Varric.

Lavellan started. He’d walked a few ways away from Haven and was now on one of the stone bridges leading to it. Varric was there, looking out over the sides towards the mountains in the distance.

“Varric,” he greeted. “Escaping Cassandra again?”

“Ha! No, not this time. I just wanted to find a good view. I do this thing where I try to come up with a really unusual comparison. Keeps my storytelling muscles working.”

Lavellan leaned over the side with him and watched as well. “What have you got so far?”

“Well, so far, I’ve compared the mountain ranges to the uneven surface of human skin when it shrivels after being burnt.”

“That did *not* go where I thought it would.”

“Good on me then,” said Varric. “But have you considered writing? Seriously, getting either of the Templars or the mages would have been a plot twist, but you got *both*. And you *ended the war*.” He let out a disbelieving laugh. “You just keep dishing out surprises, don’t you, Glow?”

Oh, just you wait.

“That’s me. I live to entertain. Fall out of the Fade, travel time, kick demon ass, close the gaping asshole in the sky...”

“Help refugees, hire Qunari spies, hire a mercenary group that started out wanting to kill you,” listed Varric. “That’s... a lot. I know things have been a bit fast lately. Maferath knows I’m barely keeping up. But what about you? You’re the one in the thick of it.”

Lavellan traced the stone of the bridge and chewed on his lip.

“I’m super stressed,” he admitted. “The things I saw in the future... I want to circumvent a few variables.”

“A few. Why does it sound like you meant to say ‘all’?”

He snorted. “What? Me? No!”

“Look Glowy, it’s good to be prepared. Really. I, for one, am glad we’ve got so many people trying to plan ahead. But shit, you need to rest. Like you said, you fell out of a hole in the sky, fought a demon who messed with your head, time-travelled to the future, fostered peace between two groups who’ve been at war until recently, and now you’re trying to close the hole you fell out of?” Varric took a breath. “Andraste’s tits, how are you alive?”

Lavellan’s laugh was dry, brittle, a little manic. “I don’t know Varric. I don’t know.” He *should* be dead.

“I know how you’re going to keep being alive. You’re going to take a break, however you take a break. Sleep? Hunt? Hobbies? You got any hobbies besides shooting at or slicing things?”

“I do.” Lavellan wrung his fingers. It had been a while since he’d done any wood carvings. “I whittle. Haven’t had time lately though.”

Varric’s face lit up. “There you go! Whittle away, Glowy. Whittle away. Just... do something that takes your mind off things. We can’t always work— Well, maybe Curly can, but you don’t wanna be like Curly, trust me.”

“Commander Cullen is a sensible man.”

“The monster goes to sleep with socks on.”

“I sleep with socks on. I freeze my balls out here, Varric.”

Varric gave him a long, hard look, and made a pained noise. He clutched at his chest as if he’d been shot and turned away with a hand raised between them like a barrier.

“Maniacs. Every single one of you.”

“You knew what you were signing on for.”

He groaned. “I think I’d rather demons.”

Lavellan grinned and enjoyed the silence that befell them, the sun warm on his face. He *did* bring his whittling knives with him when he left the clan. They should be in his pack in the cabin.

“Hey, Glowy?”

“Hm?”

Varric hesitated and Lavellan angled his head towards him, waited.

He shook his head. “Seriously. I’m worried about you. Take care of yourself, alright?”

Lavellan bumped Varric with his shoulder. Varric had worried before and Lavellan had never listened. Foolish.

“I’ll do my best. Thanks for looking out for me.”

Varric smiled.

The weeks passed. The Templars regained their strength and the mages were there as backup should the Templars prove not enough for the Breach. Haven was sorted too. They were ready for an evacuation after Lavellan had raised his concerns to the advisors about this Elder One and lied that he'd heard of Haven perishing in the Redcliffe future. Chancellor Roderick told them of the pilgrimage path after a *tedious* conversation — or argument depending on who you asked — and the path had been cleared. Because Roderick and he may have their differences, but at the end of the day, they cared about Haven and those in need of shelter.

“Should we not just evacuate them fully then?” asked Josephine. “If we are to come under attack?”

“We’ll begin evacuating the injured and the ill, then the children and less able-bodied,” he said. “But if Haven is empty, the Elder One will keep going until he finds us. Finds me. Then where would we be? Out in the open, vulnerable?”

“He’s right,” sighed Cullen as he rubbed the back of his neck. “We can’t evacuate them early either. The medics need time to sort out preparations, so does everyone. “

“I’ll have scouts on lookout,” said Leliana.

Before, they'd celebrated after the Breach had closed and he regretted that he'd take that celebration away now, but the payoff of death wasn't worth it. They could celebrate in Skyhold. If his tampering hadn't affected that outcome. It was Solas' castle, and they were still in the Frostbacks, so he doubted the development would alter.

Lavellan geared himself, took deep breaths while he held the stone in his hand, then tucked it back in his pocket. He met up with Solas and Cassandra at Haven's gates, the Templars and a few mages arrayed behind them.

The march back to the Temple of Sacred Ashes was solemn. Their arrival more so.

The Breach stretched above, consuming the skies caught within its vicinity. Lavellan couldn't resist staring. It pulled at him. It was beautiful in a haunting, foreboding way, a way that couldn't be if this world was to remain intact.

Solas stood beside him, the wooden blocks on his staff knocking against each other. Lavellan eyed the blocks. He'd taken Varric's earlier advice and had returned to whittling, but he hadn't been able to think of anything to carve and had instead whittled down blocks of wood. It had still been therapeutic if a bit of a waste of wood. But those blocks though... They really weren't doing Solas' staff any justice. If Solas was going to draw odd looks by having them tied to his staff for Lavellan's sake, Lavellan could at least make the wood pretty.

They would be wolves. Obviously.

“Are you ready?” Solas asked and snapped Lavellan out of his reverie about wooden wolves and whittling.

“I have to be.”

“The injured are being evacuated as of this moment,” said Cassandra.

Lavellan nodded. “Good.” He pursed his lips as he stared up at the Breach. “Let’s get to stitching the hole in the sky, shall we?”

Cassandra and Solas turned to instruct the Templars on how to weaken the Breach as Lavellan stepped forward. The Anchor sputtered with green and the pull skated over his skin.

He looked over his shoulder. The Templars gave a determined yell as they knelt, sword held in front of them, the mages standing behind them.

The Veil wavered.

Solas nodded at him. Lavellan thrust his hand out and the force of attraction between the Anchor and Breach almost pushed him back. He struggled to keep the connection open.

But the Templars weakened the Breach more and more as the seconds passed.

Lavellan yelled and clenched his fingers, pushed with his hand, The Veil wrapped around him, pulsed. The Well of Sorrows whispered something unintelligible at the back of his mind and—

Close, you damn thing!

The Veil closed, and the energy flung them back. Lights exploded and he closed his eyes from the barrage of brightness.

He opened his eyes once the lights had dimmed but he stayed down, winded and getting accustomed to the darkness of the night sky again. Cassandra and Solas’ blurry faces hovered in his vision. Somebody helped him sit up.

“You did it!” said Cassandra.

Lavellan blinked blearily and waited until everything returned to focus. Cheers echoed around them.

The stars greeted him.

Lavellan threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Here we go kiddies. It’s Corypheus the Ugly Ballsack-Looking Baddie time.

Cole is my beloved. He’s also terrific plot device <3 wahahah. Still trying to nail his voice though.

My laptop **died** so I lost some of my plot notes pffpfpptptptffft-- All good though, they're all in my noggin. But still, how annoying

Litanies for the lost minds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

the tragedy of a heart on fire—

The waiting was the hardest.

Haven was mostly deserted. Everyone had set out on the pilgrimage path and those who'd remained were volunteers.

Lavellan watched the scar that the Breach had left, then the mountains in the distance, ready for the inevitable dots of torch fire from Corypheus' army. His right hand held his dagger hilt while the left wrapped around his grounding stone. Behind him, Cullen barked orders to his soldiers and Leliana consulted with her scouts.

Varric, Blackwall, and Sera huddled in a corner, speaking in hushed whispers, tense and ready for the fight. Bull was with the Chargers, no doubt instructing them as well. Cole had isolated himself in a corner. Dorian, Cassandra, and Vivienne were in the middle of a discussion.

The sound of knocking wood approached and Solas stood beside Lavellan, staring out at the mountains.

"You should rest," said Solas. "If for a moment. Even the most supple bow breaks at a certain point."

Lavellan smiled, but that took too much energy to maintain so it didn't hold for long. "If you're going to mother-hen me, I'm afraid there's a line. So far, Varric, Cullen, and Cassandra are in front. Ah, but I suppose Cole has joined too. Occasionally the Iron Bull."

"Do you not suppose that's saying something?"

"That I'm surrounded by worrywarts."

"That you are neglecting your health."

Lavellan's expression turned embittered. "I'll rest when I'm allowed to die."

"What was it you said? Not everything has to break before it is considered not alright?"

He scowled at Solas, but he forced himself to breathe out and relax, if only for a bit.

"I have to keep going," Lavellan murmured. "Without momentum, I'll break."

"That isn't true," Solas said softly, securing his grip on his staff as he faced him. His gaze fell on the stone in Lavellan's hand, something considering in his expression, but Lavellan couldn't read it. He meant to ask, but Haven's warning bells tolled and his blood chilled, grew barbs which punctured and dragged along the walls of his veins.

Everyone sprung to attention and soldiers rushed to the trebuchets.

They wouldn't have the numbers to meet Corypheus' army head-on, so triggering avalanches with

the trebuchets really was their best bet. Lavellan nodded at Solas, who rushed ahead to the gate.

“Angry,” said Cole, suddenly beside him.

“He has a dragon,” said Lavellan. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“You thought it would scare them.”

He clenched his jaw, eyes on the sky. “I should have told them.”

“They might fear if you give them time to be scared in the night when the nightmares feed. It’s better this way.”

Was it? He shook his head. What’s done was done, and he could feel some of the soldiers looking at him, taking their cues from him, so he conversed and planned with Cullen. He stayed calm and composed, determined and unyielding.

“My scouts report this army has a mixture of Red Templars and mages in Tevinter garb,” reported Leliana. “Likely the Venatori you spoke of.”

“Only Venatori? No Fereldan mages?”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

Good. “State of the trebuchets?” he asked Cullen.

“They’ve been maintained,” said Cullen, “but the furthest was giving us trouble. I think it’s the cold. Some of the troops should be stationed at their trebuchets.”

“They’re coming in hot, Glow!” warned Varric. “Any time now!”

Lavellan unsheathed his daggers. “Our trebuchets are all counterweight so they’ll take time to reload. I want groups protecting them. Varric, Vivienne, Blackwall, Cole, and Dorian, guard the first trebuchet. Sera, Solas, Cassandra, Bull and the Chargers, we’re going to the furthest trebuchet. We’ll be under line of fire first, any objections?”

Bull hefted his axe. “Nope.”

Everyone drew their weapons and they set out.

The first group stayed at the first trebuchet while Lavellan and his group headed for the furthest one.

Just in time. The first of Corypheus’ army bore down upon them, Venatori spellbinders working with Red Templars.

“Load the trebuchet!” he yelled and dodged a slash.

One of the Chargers rushed to turn the wheel.

The Venatori spellbinders’ spells combined with the animalistic ferocity of the Red Templars turned the fight vicious. Had it been this unforgiving of a battle last time?

Solas’ barrier wrapped around him, comforting and strengthening, gave Lavellan that needed kick to the ass.

He rushed a Red Templar, dodged their strike, hit the sides of their helm with his dagger hilts. They staggered back, clutched at their head.

Solas' magic circle flashed beneath the Templar and flames engulfed them.

"They are endless!" cried Cassandra.

"Hold your ground!" he said, charged at a Venatori overwhelming an injured Inquisition soldier, buried his daggers into the slots of their armour.

"Look out!" said the soldier.

Lavellan turned, caught a hardened lyrium arm to the ribs and fell on his back, grimaced at the burst of pain. He forced himself to get up.

The Templar lashed out with their arm again.

He was still too disorientated, he couldn't dodge—

Bull shouldered them out of the way, followed through with a swing of his axe. The Templar fell. Bull brought his axe over his shoulder and crushed their breastplate.

"You good, Mercy?"

"Yeah," Lavellan mumbled, throat tight from emotions that he had no time to pay any heed to. "Thanks."

He tightened his grip around his daggers and continued his dance. Romantic when put that way, but it wasn't. It was harsh, unforgiving on their bodies and lives, and it was unsettlingly comfortable. Herald of Andraste. He also heralded death.

The trebuchet fired.

The projectile hit the mountainside and slabs of snow buried a good portion of Corypheus' army. The soldiers cheered behind him. Lavellan readied himself.

And in the skies, the dark form of the blighted dragon shrieked

"Get back!" Lavellan barked.

With a single breath, the dragon destroyed the trebuchet.

"Chief, that's a fucking dragon!" cried Krem.

"Thanks, Krem," said Bull. "I thought it was a pigeon."

"Get up," Lavellan ordered. "Up. Now. Go!" He ushered them away from the burning trebuchet before the next wave of the army could hit. There was a thunderous noise as the other trebuchet fired and caused another avalanche.

They reunited with the first group and helped them with the Venatori and Red Templars.

"Glowy," huffed Varric after they fought back the first wave. "Did you see the Maker-damned *dragon* by any chance?"

"Blew fire at us."

“And this day was going so well.”

“We need to get back behind the walls,” said Vivienne.

“Oh yeah and that’s gonna defend against the flying thing is it?” Sera asked.

“Better just a dragon than a dragon *and* the entirety of the army.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Lavellan said and headed for Haven. “Retreat back to Haven. The walls should hold against the main bulk of the army for now.”

With little option left, they did. He threw a look over his shoulder and his throat constricted at the sight of the fallen Inquisition soldiers littering the snow. Red seeped into white.

“Don’t,” Solas murmured beside him as they ran.

“No. I have to.” He needed to see. Needed to understand that he was holding lives in his hands, that every decision he made came with death. It was unavoidable, and all he could do was limit it, but he must never forget what and who had been lost.

They closed Haven’s doors behind them but a few Templars and Venatori had already infiltrated past the walls, single-minded in their destruction as they caused fires and fought the remaining Inquisition soldiers. The civilians had already been evacuated so that was a weight off his conscience at least.

The dragon flew overhead.

“The Chantry!” yelled Leliana as she shot the last of the intruders. “We can regroup there.”

Once they were within the Chantry walls, they erupted into an argument. Some of the surviving Inquisition soldiers stayed quiet, either exhausted or injured or intimidated by the assembly of Lavellan’s strange group.

Lavellan examined the others as they argued. Dorian was holding his staff awkwardly. Sprained wrist then. Sera’s nose was bleeding, Varric was sporting a black eye, Vivienne was placing more of her weight on her left leg, likely a sprained ankle. Blackwall was concussed and being attended to by Varric and Leliana. The rest were in varied states of exhaustion and pain.

“We’re sitting ducks here!” Dorian hissed.

“By all means, go outside and greet the dragon good evening,” said Vivienne.

“Can you all lower your voices at least?” Varric asked. “Hero here’s looking dazed.”

“M Fine,” Blackwall mumbled.

Lavellan already knew what he had to do, what Corypheus was here for. Cole stared at him from where he'd sequestered himself.

“You have a plan,” said Cole and that silenced everyone as they turned their attention to Lavellan. “I don’t like your plan.”

You knew this was coming, Lavellan thought and gave Cole a faint smile.

Cole looked down, his hat hiding his eyes. “I made it soft when you fall. Warm in the cold.”

“What’s he talking about?” Bull asked.

Lavellan sighed, heavy and weary and worn. “The rest of you need to get out of Haven. Someone needs to block off the path so that the enemy can’t follow. There’s one trebuchet left.”

It took them a second. Not a second longer.

“You want to bury Haven,” said Leliana, grim.

“That implies someone’s staying behind,” said Cullen.

Lavellan smiled, unwavering.

A small breath left him. “No.”

“With all due respect, Commander. I wasn’t asking for your permission.” Lavellan stared at his left hand. “The Elder One is after me because I’ve disrupted his plans. I’ll give him me. Make his life hell while I’m at it.”

“Like shit we’re letting you go alone,” Sera protested but it came out a little garbled and thick because of her bleeding nose.

“I’m with her,” said Dorian. “What kind of self-respecting Tevinter pariah am I if I don’t even fight against my idiot countrymen?”

“How’s your wrist then?” Lavellan challenged and Dorian glared.

“I can swing a staff just fine.”

“You’re compromised, Vivienne’s hurt her leg, Blackwall is concussed, Sera’s bleeding out her nose and her breathing is probably affected.”

“We can still *fight*,” Vivienne said.

Lavellan’s gaze softened. “I know. So fight to live another day.”

“Glowy,” Varric warned, “I don’t like goodbye speeches.”

“As if,” Lavellan scoffed and grinned. “You think you’re getting rid of me? Get over yourselves. I’ll find a way out of this.”

“I know you like to challenge the odds,” said Cassandra, who’d been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the whole debate, “but there is a limit to gambles.”

“I—”

She stood. “So I will come with you. Do not argue,” she said when he opened his mouth to protest. “I am neither injured nor extremely exhausted. If you will insist on being foolish, I would like to be there to increase the odds in your favour. However I can.” He recognised the staunchness in her posture, the obstinacy of her gaze, and knew he’d have better luck telling the mountains to split than convincing her otherwise.

Lavellan gave in. “Fine. But you leave when I tell you to.”

“We shall see.”

“Then you’re not coming.”

“Ugh.”

“I will come, too,” said Solas and everyone shot him a look. “I am the only mage who has not been significantly injured. And knowing you, I know you will try to use the mark as a weapon. I know how to soothe the pain that will follow.”

“Oh shit, are we auditioning?” asked Bull. “Alright. I’m not that wounded either. I’m big, I’m loud, I’ll draw enemy fire.”

Lavellan’s smile turned wry. “I’m supposed to be the bait.” He shook his head. “No. That’s it. I’m not allowing any more. Stay with the Chargers and everyone here. Keep them safe.”

Bull clenched his fists, his hold on his axe tightening despite how slippery the blood must have made it.

“Krem can lead the Chargers. My guys are enough to cover for the injured. You’re not swaying me.”

“I can break your shin.”

“You won’t.”

“Why are you all so damned stubborn?” Lavellan muttered under his breath. Reflecting back on it, he doubted he would have earned the same insistence in his previous life so he must have done some things right this time. “Fine! Bull, Cass, and Solas. No more. If anyone else tries, I’ll worsen your injury.”

Thundering noises rumbled from outside and they stared at the door.

“Time’s up,” said Lavellan. “Get out of here. I’ll keep this Elder One’s attention on me and buy you time.”

The noises spurred everyone into moving. Before Lavellan and his group could set out, Cullen laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Please,” he said. “Don’t try to do more than you can. Let this Elder One hear you and leave as soon as you’re able. We’ll fire a flare when we’re far enough. You’ll follow us.” That one was an order.

Lavellan chuckled. “Yes, Commander.”

Cullen gave him a solid pat on the shoulder, then turned and helped the soldiers up.

Sera marched up to Lavellan and punched his arm. He yelped and rubbed it with a bewildered look.

“You’re right batty and so’s outside but you’re not allowed to stop flapping,” said Sera with her fierce and scrunched expression and all that blood smeared on her neck and clothes.

He smiled. “I’ll be the battiest asshole.”

“You better.”

Lavellan threw open the Chantry doors and rushed towards the last trebuchet, tearing through the

invading ranks of Venatori and Red Templars. They were so thick that he feared they would outnumber Lavellan's group, so he opened sunder after sunder to paralyse and fell them. He pushed through the pain.

The last trebuchet stood abandoned. Lavellan manned the wheel but the Anchor scored a gash of fire and lightning up his arm and he hissed.

"Here," said Solas and soothed it.

"Thank you. Keep them off my back."

A few arrows and spells flew too close for comfort during several instances, but Solas would throw a barrier up or Cassandra and Bull would attack his would-be assailants. At one point, Lavellan spied a spellbinder hiding out behind the trees and cursed.

A blur of shadow. The spellbinder fell and there stood Cole.

"What the *hell* are you doing here?" Lavellan asked.

"Helping," was Cole's answer and when Lavellan blinked, three more Templars charging towards them collapsed and died.

Bull grunted. "When this is over, you're explaining what's going on with that... kid."

Lavellan refused to be touched that Bull said *when over if*.

Couldn't this wheel turn any faster?

"Mahanon!"

A Templar snuck up behind him. He sidestepped their slash and slammed the Templar's head against the wheel, kicked them away. They met their demise at the end of Cassandra's sword.

Solas' barrier fell but it immediately returned. Lavellan shot Solas a look. He must be pushing himself in between supporting Cassandra and Bull and keeping Lavellan alive.

After a torturous and intense few minutes that felt like hours later, Lavellan finally turned the trebuchet to the mountain behind Haven.

They dispatched of the last wave of Venatori and Templars.

"Go," he said.

They hesitated.

"It's alright," Cole reassured and pointed at the wooden planks that had been broken from the fighting, the cavern below dark and waiting. "There. A way out. He'll meet us again."

"But—" started Cassandra.

"You'll die if you stay," said Cole and she glared.

"There's a way out, you said—"

"Cassandra," Lavellan murmured, gave each of them a small, tired smile, "please. All of you. I'll have peace of mind knowing you're safe. I promise I'll meet you again."

"That's not something you can promise," Bull bit out.

"Watch me."

Bull stared at him, then threw his head back and laughed.

"You're crazy, you know that, Mercy?"

"I've been told. Now seriously. Get out of here."

The dragon approached.

"Now!" he barked. They faltered for a second.

Lavellan met Solas' gaze, their grim expressions a mirror of each other's. How had this gone last time?

He watched their retreating backs, something cold and tight within his heart.

"Solas?" Lavellan called and Solas stopped, looked back at him. He gave Solas his sincerest smile. The smile of a dying man. "Thank you." For the kindness he'd shown, for entertaining Lavellan's request for knowledge and stories.

"Come back," Solas bid, the hints of despair in his gaze.

"Okay. I will." An empty promise, and they both knew it.

Lavellan gave no such promises this time. He turned his back to them and watched the skies, ready for Corypheus, and didn't look back over his shoulder as he heard the sound of their running footsteps fading.

Stillness. The soft exhale of his breath, his strangely steady pulse in his ears, the whispers of the Well.

It was a beautiful night tonight. Not even the glow of the fires could temper it.

A shadow appeared in the skies.

The dragon dove for him, breathing fire and scorching a line on the ground. Lavellan rolled out of the way just as it landed behind him with an almighty gust from its flapping wings.

The flames were warm, surrounded them. Good thing the trebuchet remained untouched.

Lavellan took a breath, then stood.

Corypheus walked out from behind the flames and ordered the dragon to still its roaring. The dragon's breath was uncomfortably damp and warm on Lavellan's back.

"Pretender, you toy with forces beyond your ken no more," said Corypheus.

Lavellan didn't respond. Corypheus wanted him confused, fearful, cowering, and uncertain.

He wouldn't give him that satisfaction.

Corypheus narrowed his eyes at Lavellan's silence. "Mortals often lose their words in the face of the unthinkable, of things they cannot grasp. No matter. I will grant you the certainty you wish for.

Know me. Know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus.”

“You confused my silence for uncertainty,” said Lavellan. “It was merely that of apathy and pity.”

“Brave words. And yet so foolish.” He took out Fen’Harel’s orb, cradled in his sharp, skeletal fingers. Unexpected fury overtook Lavellan. How dare he stand there claiming the power of an instrument not his to use, another Tevinter taking from the elves and having the audacity to call it theirs. “But I am not here to sing praises of your supposed courage. I am here for the Anchor.”

Lavellan’s hand flared and the Anchor gravitated towards the orb, pulled his arm with it, red energy crackling around the orb, mixing with green. Lavellan gritted his teeth. Wrong, that was *wrong*. That was Solas’.

And the fury returned to Solas for being such a fool.

Corypheus spoke of his plans, postured about Lavellan’s supposed flailing, his meddling and interruption and gods, he talked too much.

“And you used the Anchor to undo it? The gall.”

Lavellan eyed the orb. If this was a tugging match, who said it was only Corypheus who could do the pulling?

He gripped his elbow and yanked on the unseen thread connecting them. Corypheus’ eyes widened, tugged forward by Lavellan’s pull.

“All I hear,” Lavellan hissed through clenched teeth, pulled and pulled and *pulled*, “is a child throwing a tantrum because his parents didn’t pay him any attention. You are no god.”

Corypheus severed the connection between them in slight panic and Lavellan smiled at having shaken him. He marched towards Lavellan in long strides and held him up by the wrists. Lavellan stared him in the eyes. Absolute fury radiated from them both. Lavellan’s lack of struggle worsened Corypheus’ anger into petulant rage.

“You speak of things you do not understand,” he hissed and threw Lavellan towards the trebuchet.

His back hit the trebuchet frame and his head recoiled from the impact. He grunted, fell, winded. His vision swam.

He forced himself to stand. Corypheus stood beside his dragon, the flames casting them in irregular shadows, and Lavellan could understand what could make them frightening.

Unfortunately for them, Lavellan had faced much, *much* worse.

“The Anchor is permanent. You have stolen it and its purpose,” said Corypheus. “So be it. I will find a way to give this world the nation and god it requires.”

Behind them, the signal flare flew, a dot of light against the darkness. Lavellan readied himself.

“But first, you must die. I will not suffer a rival, even an unknowing one.”

Lavellan stood beside the firing lever, head pounding, daggers out in a false show of aggression.

“The only unknowing one is you,” said Lavellan, pulling his lips back into a snarl. “You are arrogant, pathetic, and you are not as grand as you think you are.” There was someone smarter playing them both, someone patient and biding his time, but Lavellan would let Corypheus

continue believing he was the ultimate salvation.

It was far, far easier to cut down prey that thought itself safe.

“You are the unknowing rival, and I will not suffer you either!” he declared, opened a sunder above Corypheus and the dragon just to keep them there, and kicked the lever. The trebuchet arm creaked as it fired at the mountain. Lavellan didn’t check to see if it worked, didn’t bother as he ran towards the opening of the cavern and ignored the pain in his hand.

The rush of snow followed behind him, closer by the second.

Lavellan jumped into the cavern just as the cloud of white and cold closed at the top. He skidded and slid down the narrow walls, his bow and quiver digging into his back.

Then he fell out of its mouth into the icy caves.

Lavellan landed on a bed of furs. Cole must have put these here.

Snow rained down the tunnel on him, pouring without relent, and he scrambled up. The furs soon disappeared beneath the snow.

His disbelieving laughter echoed in the caves, the icicles glowing an eerie blue above him. He had done it.

No use staying here and waiting for the snow to fill up the cave. He hurried along.

After a while, the adrenaline began to wear off and his head swam, the pain in his hand and ribs returning. Lavellan leaned against the wall to rest momentarily, then continued, soon coming to a fork. There were markings on the wall — arrows drawn with charcoal.

Was that Cole's doing too?

Either way, Lavellan followed and arrived at the large cavern where he'd encountered a few demons. But they were absent. Had Cole cleared them out? He made a mental note to thank Cole when he next saw him.

But the hardest was yet to come.

Lavellan found the exit and bit back a sob at the large expanse of snow that greeted him. He'd bought himself time by not falling unconscious, but there was still a significant distance left between him and them.

There was a large arrow at the exit pointing down, a box resting beneath it. Lavellan frowned and opened it. There was a thick, fur coat inside.

His eyes watered as he wrapped it around himself.

“Thank you, Cole,” he whispered.

Emboldened by the gesture, Lavellan took his first step out into the cold.

He’d forgotten this. It'd been on his mind, of course. He'd known what this escape would entail and that his survival still wouldn't be guaranteed, but he'd forgotten how arduous it was. How heavy each cold step was. The snow was thick around his ankles as he trudged through and the wind covered any tracks the others could have left behind. His only markers were the small campfires they had set.

The adrenaline from battle faded completely, left him with nothing but the stinging wind, the snow, and the Well in his ears. His ribs throbbed with every step, his hand pulsated with irregular spikes of lightning, his head pounded with a dull ache.

His vision swam in and out of focus.

Keep going, you cannot fall here.

White. Around him, ahead of him, behind him. Lavellan hummed his mother's lullaby to keep his mind focused and take it off the cold and exhaustion.

The wind blew snow into his face and he burrowed deeper in the coat. But the chill needled into the marrows of his bone and hooked itself onto any available surface. His humming turned tremulous as his teeth chattered.

At one point, he found a cluster of trees. Lavellan leaned against one, lightheaded. Every breath burned the walls of his lungs, lullaby forgotten.

There was a small campfire nearby. He crouched to check for embers, but his legs gave and he fell into the snow.

Lavellan groaned and pushed himself up, examined the campfire.

No embers in the ashes.

He collapsed beside it and stayed down, choked back a sob, snow against his numbed cheek.

He couldn't do it.

It was so desolate, so barren, so lonely. He was all alone. He was going to die alone.

He felt as if his joints had frozen in place, as if his ligaments might snap if he moved. Lavellan cradled his left hand close to him, but even the pain had numbed. He shivered in his coat and feared that if he cried, his tears would freeze and cover his face and stop his breath. Irrational, but he wouldn't dismiss it at this point.

A wolf howled in the distance.

Lavellan looked up. "Solas?" he whispered through numbed lips. Was it possible? He recalled that Solas could momentarily control a wolf, could form an intrinsic connection with them, but such a spell was taxing. It was rare for him to do so, and often unneeded. Was Solas strong enough to do it now?

The wolf continued its howls.

He took a fortifying breath. Solas or not, it was the encouragement he needed.

Lavellan pushed himself up, limbs protesting and leaden, but he was up and that was something.

"One step," he murmured to himself.

Once he was walking again, the howling stopped. Lavellan huffed out a disbelieving breath. Could it be?

He forced himself forward until the trees disappeared behind him and he was back to the endless expanse of snow and soft snowstorm.

The snowstorm soon worsened and his visibility dropped.

Lavellan stopped, hopelessness seizing his throat as he looked around, lost.

Another howl. To the left.

His heart stuttered.

Creators, could it truly be Solas?

Lavellan wrapped the coat tighter around himself and went left. The superstitious elves in his clan would have thought it Fen'Harel and go the other way, unwilling to be led astray by the Dread Wolf. The Dread Wolf who misguided by guiding. A false show of help. Then again, it was also said that wolves were the companions and guardians of the Emerald Knights. So which was it? Protector or deceiver? Neither? Both?

“What would you prefer Fen'Harel to do if he were to become fond of you?”

“Is he fond of me?” Lavellan mused to himself.

The howling stopped once he followed the sound. Whenever he fell, a howl would spur him back up. Whenever he was lost, a howl would point him in the right direction. It truly was no coincidence then.

But no matter how many times the wolves howled, Lavellan couldn't deny that he was weakening with every step. The snow deepened. Lifting his legs became an exercise of futility as the exertion and exhaustion weighed them down.

In the distance, he spied a mountain pass and a faint glow beyond.

The howls stopped.

He passed a campfire. It was still warm. Lavellan almost sobbed anew.

“I'm here,” he gasped. “Please.” The snow was up to his knees, and it was uphill to the pass. He dragged himself up using the boulders around him, fingers numb even through the gloves.

His vision flickered.

Lavellan stumbled, lurched, fell face-first into the snow. The cold burned into his skin. He reached and clawed into the snow until he could compact it into a weak purchase, dragged himself forward, teeth chattering as he gritted them, arms trembling as he strained them.

His shoulders shook from his soft sobs. But there were no tears.

Not here. He didn't want to die here.

Or maybe he could finally rest. Maybe the world would be alright without him. Why did it have to be him? Why should he be the one to save the world? There were other heroes, others who would band together to stop this, so why should it be him? Why should he be the herald of change? Why should he be the change?

Lavellan stopped pulling himself forward.

He stared at his left hand stretched out ahead of him, gaze hollow. The Anchor flickered green.

Could he rest now? He'd done it, he'd saved the stupid world from stupid Solas, but why had he been robbed of his rest?

Lavellan closed his eyes. If he would not be allowed rest, then he would take it his damned self.

He fell into darkness.

It was a lake on the edge of the world.

The sky shimmered with impossible colours and a black wolf was in the lake with him, its largeness as impossible as the hue of the skies. Blood swirled in the crystalline waters. He reached out a sunlit hand, the brightness casting trenches of shadows upon his skin. As endless as the depths of the lake.

He caressed the wolf's cheek, buried fingers into its fur. Soft, warm. The wolf closed its eyes.

His hands came away coated in melting darkness, thick and viscous. It dripped into the waters and diffused into red. He reached with both hands and smeared the darkness away, revealing white fur beneath.

The wolf opened its eyes and they glimmered blue, not red, imploring.

He understood and raked his fingers through, washed the slick darkness away with the lake even as the black crawled up his arms. The wolf's face was soon freed of the muck, white and brilliant fur gleaming. But the black was quick to return. No matter how much he flung it away, it was relentless and tenacious and the wolf was engulfed once more. Its eyes reddened.

The blackness reached his chest and split it open.

This world was unforgiving, solid, unchanging. He thrashed and gasped and clawed at his throat and his chest and there was an encouraging chorus of hissing whispers.

[Laimathe. Danathe.](#)^[1]

Hands held him down and no, *no*, let him go.

“[Vasrea em!](#)” he roared. “[Se telaan vaslana em!](#)”^[2]

Voices, more hands, and he resisted, thrashed against their grip and yelled and screamed and kicked and flailed.

“...hold...get— Down!”

[Shivana.](#)^[3]

“[Thu?](#)^[4]”

[Hima.](#)^[5]

There was a voice, more focused than the rest. Not a whisper of the Ancients but a solid, anchoring sound. Just as ancient. Not as faded.

They bid him, “[Hamina. Ma ane eth.](#)^[6]”

Warmth washed over him and he succumbed to darkness once more.

Lavellan awoke with a shuddering gasp.

Chapter End Notes

You all wanted him to rest, right? :) Well, here he is! Resting! :D

(Listen, the wolves probably weren't Solas' doing in-game but I do what I want.)

Translation

[1] **Laimathe. Danathe:** The Lost. The Broken^{[1][2]}

[2]

Vasrea em!: Let me go! (lit. Free me)

Se telaan vaslana em!: You(pl.) cannot subdue me!^{[1][2]}

[3] **Shivana:** Do your duty^{[1][2]}

[4] **Thu?:** How?^{[1][2]}

[5] **Hima:** Change/Evolve^{[1][2]}

[6] **Hamina. Ma ane eth:** Rest. You are safe^{[1][2]}

To guide a burdened soul

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

and find your own—

His cognition returned at the pace of ice thawing beneath the sun. Lavellan spent an inordinate amount of time staring blankly at the tent canvas stretched high above him and battled the urge to sob at how it ached to exist. On both a physical and mental scale. He'd promised he would return alive and return alive he had, but a small part of him wished he hadn't.

The rising pitch of the argument between his advisors and Cassandra finally spurred him to action. He pushed himself up on his elbows and winced as his joints complained at the movement. His teeth tasted of stale lightning.

Mother Giselle, who had been sitting beside him, turned her head at the movement and tutted, eased him back.

“You must keep resting,” she said. “You have been through a great ordeal. Allow yourself to recover.”

It took a while for him to wrangle his tongue into making productive noises.

“How long have they been yelling at each other?” he rasped. He was surrounded by makeshift beds, likely for the injured, but there were no injured in this tent besides him.

Mother Giselle sighed. “A while. Though they have that luxury thanks to you. Given time to doubt, we turn to blame.”

Lavellan shook off Mother Giselle's attempts to get him to lie back so she helped him sit up instead. He pressed the heel of his hands into his eyes. Someone had taken his gloves off. His fingers were warmer now, had feeling in them. He'd been... dreaming. Maybe. There were also faint memories of elven whispers, but the Well of Sorrows was indecipherable in the background of his mind.

“What of our enemy?” he asked.

The argument broke up and they scattered in a huff. Mother Giselle watched with uneasiness.

“They could not follow,” she said. “A few of the surviving soldiers say they have seen this creature. Man only in form, and even then, barely. Warped by red lyrium. They say he looks as if he is meant to be dead.”

“He is arrogant. Likely believes me dead and the Inquisition rendered helpless.” Lavellan hardened his gaze and swung his legs off the bed. “I doubt he'll look. He's far too preoccupied with finding another way to ascend to false divinity.” He surveyed the camp they'd assembled. Their tents were in close quarters and people were huddled around the campfires. “Is everyone alright?”

Mother Giselle hummed in consideration. “We are not dead thanks to your fast action,” she said. “But know that our leaders struggle because of what we, the survivors, witnessed. We saw our defender rise, and fall. Now he has returned. The more our enemy is beyond us, the more our trials

seem ordained.”

This again. No matter his age, no matter the battles he had witnessed, the notion of fate still left a vicious aftertaste in his throat. Such cruelty to suffer for a grander scheme. Once, he would have met fate and destiny with fear. Now? Defeat maybe. Exhaustion. The past was a heavy burden, and a heavier shackle, and no relief came from knowing the outcomes. Even less with the risks he'd taken by changing his actions.

“Why must I be the one to save the damned world?” he muttered, head bowed, and looked up at Mother Giselle. What did she see when she looked at him? A little boy playing hero or a holy figure of legend? He wasn't sure which was worse. “They need me to be strong, but I'm not who they've made me out to be. It's only going to crush them in the long run.”

Lavellan stood, still unsteady on his feet, so he leaned against the tent pole for support.

Across the camp, the mood was sullen and dismal. Cassandra pored over a map on the table, head hung, and Leliana had her knees drawn up to her chest, a far cry from her usual confident posture.

A few saw him rise and the dismal fog in their gazes lit with hope, their stares making his skin itch. Lavellan swallowed the mounting thickness in his throat. He'd never known what to do with their reverence, their faith, their hope, and later, their worship. They'd built small shrines of him, though nothing grand in fear of the Chantry's ire. Some had carved him with one hand to his chest, his left outstretched with a halo around it. Some had carved him with a crown of halla horns. Some had carved him as nothing but his marked hand.

How could anyone enjoy this? How could Corypheus seek this? Worship was a terrible, heavy burden.

Mother Giselle's soft voice sang from behind him and he tensed.

He was grateful that it uplifted everyone's mood as they sang along, but not like this. Not when their stares were strangling him.

Cassandra's gaze fell on him and it softened into relief. Seeing her calmed him for a while, but the song crescendoed and the swell of everybody's faith had his chest constricting anew. They knelt at his feet, hands grasped in prayer.

“I'm not your answer,” he wanted to say. “I'm not your salvation.”

Not that they would listen.

His gaze scanned the camp, searching for familiar faces. He subtly reached inside his pocket and groped for the stone but it wasn't there and that sent a fresh bolt of panic within him. Where was it? Did he lose it in the avalanche? On the way here? While fighting in Haven? No, that couldn't be. He'd leapt and rolled and all sorts of things and not once had the stone fallen before. Did they take it from him?

His searching gaze turned frantic, until they locked onto Solas.

He was by the edge of the camp, the distance between them too wide, and Lavellan wanted to reach out, to cry out for help, but also to revile him. To spit, “Look at what you've done to me,” in vindictive despair. If he could even muster such strong emotions right now.

Their gazes met. Lavellan was bare, unmoored without his weapons, without his stone, without his fury and anger. Lost, bereft.

The Well of Sorrows mimicked the melody. A pale imitation because it couldn't incorporate complex tones into its whispers. It worsened everything. He wanted to leave. He should have died in the snow.

He should have died with Solas.

The song ended and Solas made his way towards them. The crowd chattered, their hope renewed. His breath lifted when those who'd been kneeling stood and left him be.

"You are not alone," Mother Giselle said. "Just as you are our pillar, so too are we yours. Even Andraste had her trusted circle."

Andraste had Maferath.

Solas passed him and murmured, "A word?"

Lavellan had Solas.

What was the lesson? Your lovers will betray you if you were some kind of holy figure?

He followed, glad to be away from the camp where they viewed him as prophet and saviour, but he wasn't sure whether being alone with Solas was a better or worse situation.

Solas led him to a cliff ledge overlooking the mountains beyond where Lavellan had likely trekked through. He held up a hand and lit a Veilfire. Effortless. Lavellan eyed the green flames. It seemed he was regaining his strength, so perhaps Lavellan's theory about the wolves wasn't far-fetched.

"It has been ages beyond counting since the humans raised one of our people so high," said Solas. Lavellan frowned. *Our*? Solas turned and regarded Lavellan. "Most would preen. Perhaps become arrogant. Yet you looked so miserable."

Lavellan hugged himself, unable to meet the intensity of Solas' gaze so he looked down at the snow. He noticed Solas was still barefoot.

"Solas?"

"Yes?"

He pointed at Solas' feet. Most of it was wrapped but his toes were *out* and here Lavellan was making icicles. "Are you not cold?"

Solas looked down at them as if he had forgotten. "Oh. Yes, it is no cause for concern. It does not hurt."

Lavellan never knew what to do with this man sometimes.

"You seemed uncomfortable when the humans knelt before you," said Solas. "I had assumed you would have felt vindicated."

Lavellan smiled grimly. "Do you think that poorly of me?"

Solas clasped his hands behind his back, mouth thinning into a displeased line. He turned his head away.

"No," he murmured, and it almost sounded shamed. "Not you. I did not mean... It was not you I thought poorly of, rather the general behaviour I have observed. I apologise."

Lavellan pursed his lips and looked down, trembling. "It's fine. I just... don't understand how anybody could enjoy worship. It's so heavy. Isolating."

"Then you are a rare spirit." He shepherded Lavellan closer to the Veilfire. "Come. You are cold." He waved his hand and changed it to ordinary fire so that it would radiate heat. It was a nice gesture but Lavellan suspected that the chill in him wasn't just physical. Solas peered at him. "You were on the brink of death when we found you and you rejected the healing magic the mages used. Even Senior Enchanter Vivienne and Grand Enchanter Fiona's magic."

That was new. Had that been a problem before?

"I was hardly conscious to accept or reject anything."

"You were rejecting it on a more instinctual level." Solas' eyes glinted in the firelight, swimming with curiosity. "Exhausted of options, they fetched me. I arrived to find you thrashing and screaming in Elvish. It was only when I spoke back to you in Elvish that you calmed and accepted my magic."

Oh Creators. "What was I saying?"

"You were crying to be freed. That they cannot chain you. I assumed you must have been semiconscious and projecting past memories into your present. You do not recall?"

Lavellan shook his head. "I don't know why I'd be crying those either."

"Were you dreaming?"

A lake, a wolf, tar and blood and darkness and void and sunlight, red eyes and blue and—

Lavellan rubbed his eyes. "Yes. But it wasn't exactly something that would warrant my screaming." He groaned. "Everyone must have heard."

"Yet it only feeds into the legends."

"The Herald of Andraste thrashes like a cornered animal in his sleep," he muttered dryly. "Oh yes. They'll surely sing praises of *that*."

"The Herald of Andraste battles nightmares like any common person and yet awakes victorious. You are a symbol of overcoming an adversary. They wish to see an imperfect perfection. They wish to see themselves reflected, and yet they want for one whose name they may invoke in their struggles to impart them strength. You are that. Their faith is hard won, lethallin." The term of familiarity and endearment startled Lavellan. Solas wasn't one to throw out those terms easily. Da'len, yes, fair enough, he was thousands of years old. Lethallin? Not so much. Solas had used it for him in his past life too.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the fact that Solas liked him enough again.

"I'm sure you didn't drag me here to talk about how I'm walking a precarious line with their faith," Lavellan said. "Was there something you wanted to discuss?"

Solas frowned. "I... Yes. When you met this Elder One, what manner of power did he wield?"

"He carried an orb," said Lavellan, saw no use dancing around it. "It was connected to the mark and he used it to try and take the mark from me. If it was a connection, I saw no reason why he should be the only one pulling. That surprised him. I don't think he expected for me to have that

level of control over the mark.”

Solas’ frown deepened. “As I feared,” he said.

“You know about it.”

“Yes. It is ours. Corypheus used it to open the Breach and unlocking it must have caused the explosion at the Conclave. We must know how he survived and prepare for when those who have placed their faith in you find out that the orb is of our people.”

Our people?

“How do you know about it?”

“Such things were foci. They channelled power from our gods. Some dedicated to specific members of our pantheon.” *Our?* When he’d been so adamant on saying *my* people? “All that remains are references in ruins and faint memories in the Fade. Echoes of a dead empire.”

Here he was again with such well-crafted words. The reliance on the other’s supposition to fill in the blanks because he knew that people were quick to jump to assumptions and conclusions when something was left open for their interpretation. Technically, he wasn’t lying outright. It was clever.

Lavellan hated it.

“However Corypheus came to it, the orb *is* elven. With it, he threatens the heart of human faith.”

“Ah, so here we have another case of another idiot taking something from the elves, declaring it as theirs now, and patting themselves on the back for a job well done.”

Solas’ lips twitched. “That does seem to be their hobby, yes. They fear the other, and our people are the other.”

Our people again. Lavellan threw his head back and barked out a bitter laugh. “It’s *our* people now, is it? Dropped the adamanche with saying *my* people? What is this? Do you pity me? Or did I do something that made you change your views of me and let me in on your secret society of elves?”

He stared at Lavellan, silent in the wake of his outburst.

“There is hardly a secret society,” Solas finally said and Lavellan’s laugh bordered on manic because wasn’t that the fucking truth? It was him, Flemeth, a bunch of Sentinel Elves, and other ancient elves tucked away somewhere in uthenera.

Lavellan’s trembling legs couldn’t hold him up anymore and they collapsed, sent up snow when he fell on his ass, and he was still laughing. His laughs somehow transitioned into unhinged sobs.

“Are you kidding me?” he spat at the onset of tears and rubbed them away but they refused to cease. His shoulders heaved. His breaths hiccupped. Why did he have to keep crying in front of Solas? This was ridiculous and humiliating. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I— Fuck.”

Solas knelt beside him and eased Lavellan’s hands away from scrabbling at his face.

“I should have died,” Lavellan whispered, pushed through the thickness of his throat and the tremor of his breaths. Every sob tore into his lungs. The dry mountain air helped little. He grabbed

Solas because he was the only solid thing around, fisting his hands so hard into Solas' tunic that a few threads from the seams snapped. "I should have died!"

We both should have died.

Instead, here he was, crying in front of his supposed-to-be-dead lover, doing it all over again. Lavellan couldn't even see Solas past the blur of tears and he placed his forehead over Solas' chest instead, shivering.

Solas was warm.

Arms wrapped around him and that started another wave of sobs. Lavellan clutched at the fabric of Solas' tunic and at some point, his blubbing of, "I should have died," morphed into, "I'm sorry."

"Mahanon," Solas whispered, soft and caring and oh gods Lavellan had killed him. Why did he feel like home? Why?

Solas reached into his pockets and eased one of Lavellan's hands off his tunic so he could press something smooth and cool into it.

It was the stone. The very same one with the taper at the bottom and the marks on its surface that Lavellan was close to memorising by sight and touch. And now it was a memory of Haven too.

Lavellan clutched it close to his chest and managed to whimper out a watery thank you.

He wasn't sure how long he wept in Solas' arms, how long they stayed out there in the cold with the snow seeping into the material of his trousers, how long Lavellan exhausted tears he hadn't realised he'd needed to shed. Hadn't thought that they could be shed. But even as his tears dried and Lavellan stopped heaving, Solas kept his arms firm around him.

It was so silent, the snow absorbing the noise.

"I am relieved you survived," Solas murmured. "And so are a great number of us. Whether you should or should not have died is nobody's to answer, but I am glad you survived. Even if living comes with a heavy burden."

Lavellan succumbed to his weakness for a little while and held Solas tighter. He was doing an awful lot of succumbing to weaknesses around Solas. He had to be careful. But Solas was a comfort and the steady beat of his heart grounded him, so he closed his eyes and relished it while it lasted.

"Thank you," Lavellan rasped, soft and almost lost to the blanket of snow. "I thought I was going to die out there. Alone. This is going to sound bizarre, but I think the wolves guided me."

"The wolves?"

Look at him trying to act oblivious. "I did say it was bizarre. Whenever I was lost or felt like giving up, they would howl. And I would keep going."

"Then I am glad for the wolves."

He opened his swollen and irritated eyes, staring at the flickering flames. "It makes me wonder."

"About?"

He stayed quiet. It was fun teasing Solas, but he needed to limit how often he did it otherwise it

would spark Solas' suspicion.

"Never mind," he said and shook his head. "It's silly."

"Tell me."

"You'll think I'm stupid."

"I doubt that."

Lavellan snorted, contemplated telling him, then sighed. He was tired and felt like he'd been rubbed raw. He had no filters left.

"Alright. I entertained for a moment that it was Fen'Harel guiding me." To Solas' credit, he didn't freeze or tense or give anything away through his body language. "And of course, I remembered all the stories of how the Dread Wolf misguides you."

"Yet you still followed." Even his tone was unmoved.

"The Emerald Knights had wolves for companions," he fired back. "Wolves don't solely belong to the Dread Wolf. I either take my chance and possibly live or listen to stories and possibly die. Or the other way around. Honestly, I was talking to myself at that point so I can't guarantee how sane I was."

Solas laughed and the sound echoed in his chest.

"You and your chances," he mused. It almost sounded fond.

And Lavellan had savoured this moment long enough. He had to lead the conversation to Skyhold.

"I'm not going to continue risking it," said Lavellan. "Not when there's the rest of Haven with me stuck in the mountains." He pulled away. Solas let him and Lavellan ignored how swiftly the cold flooded into the distance between them. "We can hardly deal with Corypheus and take back the orb when we're lost like this."

"You plan to retrieve the orb?"

"Of course I do." *I'm cleaning up your mess, as per usual.* "Not like this though. If we can find out where we are, we may be able to take shelter elsewhere in the meantime."

Solas was silent for a few moments and Lavellan gave him time to think. He was effectively giving his home to them. To the Inquisition. That was a large decision.

"There is a place," said Solas. "I have dreamed it in Haven. There is a fortress waiting for a force to hold it. A place where the Inquisition can build." He looked at Lavellan, gaze intent, eyes like cut crystals. Lavellan couldn't look away. "*Grow*. Corypheus has changed the Inquisition by attacking it. Changed *you*. Scout to the north. Be their guide."

Lavellan knew the weight of this now, so he gave Solas a smile and hoped it conveyed the depth of his gratitude.

"Will you help me find it?" he asked.

Solas returned his smile.

Lavellan looked back at the Inquisition's procession behind him to ensure they were alright. They later happened upon a wide dirt path during their journey to Skyhold which Lavellan took as a sign that they were on the right track.

He scaled boulders and mountainsides for a better vantage point and shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun.

The Frostbacks stretched ahead, their peaks protruding like the jagged spines of a slumbering beast. The clouds wisped around them, the lavender of the dawning sky painting their coat of snow.

They'd been walking for days, likely bordering on a week, but there were minimal complaints. They all believed this to be a trial and that since their Herald of Andraste was guiding them, everything would be alright. He couldn't help but be reminded of the elves' long walk to establish a home in the Dales.

A raven flew overhead, perched near him. A wild raven, not the red-crested species that Leliana used as messengers. It stared at him. Lavellan smiled.

"Hello," he greeted. "We're just passing by."

The raven cawed at him and took off.

"You planning to talk to the horses next?" asked Bull below him.

Lavellan grinned at him. "Sure, why not? I'm already talking to a bull, aren't I?"

"I can already talk. Doesn't count."

"Well maybe the animals can talk too and you just don't hear them."

Bull paused, then threw his hands up in defeat and walked off with good-natured grumbling.

Lavellan charted their next course and followed it, continued north. He soon spotted a familiar slab of bedrock, hurriedly clambered over it, and seeing Skyhold again almost weakened his knees. Which would have been terrible. He'd have pitched face-first into the long drop below.

Solas followed close and stood beside him as they both beheld the fortress.

"Skyhold," Solas whispered.

Home.

And the place of Solas' greatest regret.

Skyhold ruled the mountains, with its towers and walls of ancient stones and flags belonging to the previous and long-forgotten holders after Solas.

Lavellan stole a glance at Solas. The wisps of wistfulness lingered in the edges of his expression, nostalgia in his eyes. Lavellan looked back at Skyhold and couldn't help but agree. Their memories of it were obviously different, but it was home to them both, nonetheless.

"Thank you, Solas," he said and again, wished he could convey the weight of it, the acknowledgement of how significant this was for Solas.

Solas' smile and small nod made Lavellan entertain the notion that maybe he'd managed to convey it after all.

The sword of the Inquisition rested heavy in Lavellan's hand and here he was again, standing in front of them all, about to accept the mantle of Inquisitor.

"The Inquisition will fight for all of us," he declared. "For those in need, whoever they may be. And right now, we have an enemy who threatens our lives, the lives of our loved ones, the very world. This is not a promise of vengeance, not a promise of sending a greater message. This is a promise of being wherever we are needed, not out of nobility or valour, but because it is right."

What had he said last time? Who knew, but he doubted it had changed even after six years. Although, he may be more articulate and less nervous this time.

"Wherever you lead us," said Cassandra.

They hailed him then as their Herald and Inquisitor and Lavellan raised the sword, gaze determined.

He'd been broken, and he would no doubt keep breaking, but he would return stronger.

Without fail.

Skyhold's Great Hall lay in shambles. A solitary throne governed over the wreckage comprised of fallen chandeliers and piles of split wood, an abandoned seat, the sovereign of ruins. Had Solas sat there, once? Or was that a new throne introduced by those who had occupied Skyhold after his slumber?

If Lavellan closed his eyes, he could picture the banners, the rich red and black carpet spread along the length of the floor. He could faintly hear the chatter of visiting dignitaries, the crackle of the brazier flames, could see the light fracturing into colours as it passed the stained glass of the windows.

The Veil was ancient here. It would make sense. This was where it was created after all.

Skyhold. *Tarasył'an Te'las*. The place where the sky was held back.

The Dread Wolf's home.

The ancient magic saturating the stones and the air vibrated over his skin.

"So this is where it begins," said Cullen.

Leliana brushed her hand over a fallen scaffolding. "It began in the courtyard. This is where we turn that promise into action."

"But what will we do?" asked Josephine, rubbing her eyes. "We know nothing about this Corypheus except that he wanted your mark. Honestly, if it hadn't come from you, I would not have believed it."

"He's lost his way into the Fade," said Lavellan, "so he's going to keep looking. He'll do whatever it takes to reach the Black City and ascend to divinity. Even if it means this world burns. All for the sake of an empire that no longer exists." Was he talking about Solas or Corypheus?

Both.

"There's also the matter about his dragon," said Cullen. "Archdemon or no, it gives his forces an advantage we can't ignore."

"For now, we need to deal with this dark future the Inquisitor saw in Redcliffe," said Leliana, testing how his title felt. Hearing it again was like the final piece of the puzzle falling in place. Even after the Inquisition had disbanded, the others as well as Solas' forces had still referred to him as Inquisitor out of habit. Besides, it was much better than Herald.

Lavellan watched the play of light from the stained windows. "We need to get ourselves back up first. Re-establish ourselves and show the world we're still here even after Corypheus attacked and that we're stronger than ever for it."

Josephine smiled. "And that we are no longer leaderless."

"Which is more than the Chantry could say," Cullen muttered.

"How do you propose we move forward?" Leliana asked Lavellan.

He chewed on his lip. "First, get our operations up and running again. Spread word that we're alive. When we've done that, figure out what upcoming events would give Corypheus a chance to assassinate the Empress. As for the demon army..."

Someone cleared their throat behind them.

They turned. Varric waved at them, right on time.

"I know someone who could help with that," he said. "Everyone acting all inspirational jogged my memory so I sent a message to an old friend."

The advisors shared a look and Lavellan approached Varric.

"She's crossed paths with Corypheus before," explained Varric. "She can help."

Lavellan remembered the surly scowl Hawke would present to everyone, softened only by her family and friends even as she carried the darkness of someone who had lost so much. They were kindred spirits on that front. She was a tough woman.

"Introduce us then," said Lavellan with a small smile. "When will she get here?"

"This place is a little tucked away but... give her two days."

Leliana gave Varric a long, hard look. "Cassandra is going to kill you," she said.

Varric grimaced. "Yeah, uh, don't tell her. Let me enjoy my final two days as a free and very much alive dwarf."

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan is *not* having a good time ouch.

Anyway we're finally in Skyhold!! After... *checks* 70k something words aha...

Somewhat unrelated but anytime Hozier's song 'In the Woods Somewhere' pops up in my playlist, my soul ascends just a little bit . I love that man. I love that song. UGH atmospheric.

A garden of tears

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

rest where the roses wilt—

Lavellan roamed Skyhold — what areas he could anyway — and ran his hands over the stone, let the magic imbued within wrap around him like a familiar and comforting blanket. Skyhold wasn't truly his, but for a time, he had carved a home into it.

Skyhold had two baileys: one situated in front of the Great Hall, and another behind it, accessible via the walls behind the stables or behind the armoury. The front bailey was divided into the lower and upper courtyards, which held most of the communal amenities like the tavern and stables. The rear bailey held buildings reserved for residence and housekeeping. Skyhold was almost a village on its own.

For now, the rear bailey was inaccessible. Instead, makeshift tents had been set up in Skyhold's front bailey while everyone searched the castle for any areas fit for temporary occupation.

Though Skyhold had already been heavily modified from its original state, there were still strong remnants of the original ancient elven architecture such as the gardens. The openness of the rotunda also screamed ancient elven because of its priority on aesthetic over practicality (seriously, look at all that wasted space). The arches in the residential areas were also distinctly ancient elven.

Either way, magic still dwelled within the walls, ancient elven stones or otherwise.

He descended into the front bailey and spotted Sera in one of the tents, pacing back and forth and muttering to herself, her distress more obvious than Corypheus' pet dragon, so he approached her.

Her expression eased the slightest when she saw him.

"Hey Inquisitor," she said. "Remember when we had that talk about stickin' arrows in the baddies?" She bared her teeth. "That's not a frigging archdemon, is it?" She looked down and muttered, "Andraste, what'd I step in?"

"It was hardly an archdemon. No self-respecting archdemon would bow to that walking bag of red lyrium wrapped in wrinkled scrotum skin."

Sera snorted and giggled, then forced a frown back on. "Wait, no! Don't make me laugh, you daft tit. I'm trying to yell at you."

"What'd I do?" he asked, voice rising half a pitch in bewilderment.

"You're the closest one I can yell at," she fired back, voice rising another half a pitch from his, before she shook her head. "I just got all this Chantry stuff in my head, right? He says he's cracked the Black City but that's a hazy dream. If not? Seat of the Maker? Real thing. A seat needs a butt so Maker? Real thing. Fairy stories about the start and end of the world? Real things."

Sera gazed at the sky, looking as if the sheer expanse of it overwhelmed her. She was a reminder that not everybody walked certain in their faith. That she was a part of the uncertain majority. Solas was right, Corypheus threatened the heart of human faith. Whether they were wrong about their

respective gods or not was irrelevant because when people hit rock bottom, often it was their faith which kept them going. Threatening their faith threatened their hope. Threatening their hope threatened their strength. He mustn't forget about the people he wanted to fight for.

"All I want is for things to stop being such a bung. Simple system, simple problems. Helps me, helps people, helps you. In that order. For now."

Fear breeds desire for simplicity, Solas had said.

And what was wrong with that? Well, okay, a few things, but some personally preferred something they could follow with, something that made sense.

"Thanks, Sera," he said.

She squinted at him in suspicion. "Get off?"

"I'm serious. I want to fight for those who need me, but it's hard for me to keep my perspective when I'm at the top. I can try but I know my view is skewed. Everything is big picture and I forget the little things, the little people. I don't want to do that. So thanks, for reminding me." Lavellan rubbed the back of his head. "I know things are batty and shit makes no sense, but I hope you stay."

Sera regarded him as if she wasn't sure what to make of him.

But she eventually smiled. "So what you're sayin' is you want me to stick around so I can serve you your arse if your head gets big?"

Lavellan considered this, then shrugged. "Essentially."

She snickered. "Yeah, alright. Think I can do that."

That marked the end of their conversation and they parted with a farewell, pleased when he saw that she had significantly relaxed.

He visited parts of Skyhold, checking up on everyone. Their reverent gazes followed him as he passed, dripping like honey on his skin.

Cole lingered near the medical tents, watching over the injured. He didn't turn his head even as Lavellan stood beside him.

They'd had another large debate about Cole's situation yesterday and Lavellan had convinced them to let Cole continue his stay. If anything, because Cole knew. For once, Lavellan didn't feel burdened from seeing a dead or younger face and being unable to say anything. Unable to hug them as he would. Unable to interact with them as he would.

Was that selfish of him?

"No, it's not," said Cole. "I like helping. I help."

Lavellan softened. "You do."

"I hurt you before. I want to help."

"That wasn't you Cole. That was Compassion. Whatever the reason was, I can't judge him for it."

"You should," Cole said, soft, almost lost to Skyhold's thin air. "But you won't."

"Should but won't seems to be a running theme with me." Should have turned Bull away but wouldn't. Should have turned Blackwall away but wouldn't. Should have killed Solas (again) but wouldn't.

"You care so much," said Cole. "Heart spilling with softness and sorrow but you wish it wouldn't. Why?"

"It's exhausting. And foolish."

"But you keep going?"

Even Lavellan didn't understand it. "Because I care so much. It comes full circle."

Cole merely nodded in understanding.

"Thank you for the cave, by the way," Lavellan said. "For the furs and the directions and the coat."

"Did they help?"

"Yes. Immensely."

"Good. I'm glad. You're here now, and that helps everyone too. Solas was sad, desperate, pushed himself to limits. Nothing sang the same and he worked with droplets where there used to be a river, but he had to *try*." Lavellan's heart stopped momentarily, and when the beats resumed, they were stuttering and echoing in the chamber of his chest. "You were brilliant, gleaming, and he made it hurt. It was his hurt which gave you yours and he had to try. He searched and healed and gave his old home."

"Cole," said Lavellan, voice dry, "I don't think you should announce Solas' thoughts out loud to me."

"But he wants you to hear them. And you want to know."

He wanted Lavellan to hear them?

"They called him Liar but it cages him. He wants to tell the truth when he can, a breath in a sea of lies."

"Solas *is* a pretty terrible liar," Lavellan mused and shook his head. "Out of the two of us, I think I lie the most though."

Cole gave him a calm yet intense stare. "You change faces."

Lavellan blinked.

"And you change things with your change. You leave yourself, even here. The stones thrum, thrilled and thick while they wait and wonder what memories you'll give them. Maybe you'll shake them when you roar." Cole looked up, scanned the walls, the structures. "They remember everything."

“Uh,” he said in all his glorious eloquence.

Cole disappeared within a blink and reappeared beside one of the injured, raising a glass of water to their lips. Lavellan took that to mean the end of their conversation and walked away, mystified as he tended to be after speaking to Cole.

They had their first War Council meeting and Lavellan ran his hand over the great slab of tree trunk that been turned into the large table.

“This place is amazing,” breathed Cullen as he looked out the window. “Its position makes it pretty much impenetrable. How has a place like this remained lost for so long?”

“Solas claims that the magic imbued into the site likely acted as a protective measure,” said Leliana. “I asked him why it would let itself be found by us.”

“What did he say?” asked Josephine.

“That he cannot claim to know how a place of old and unknown magic picks and chooses.”

“That does sound like an answer he’d give,” said Lavellan.

It had been a day since they’d found Skyhold and construction was already well under way. Lavellan had requested for them to focus on clearing the rear bailey so they could house as many people as possible. He’d also sent ravens to Speaker Anaise and her cult in the Hinterlands to spread word that the Inquisition was well and alive.

“What is on the agenda today?” Josephine asked.

The three looked to him and he took a small breath. Right. Inquisitor now.

“We need to get stronger,” he said. “Me too. We need an extra edge.”

“Then this may be of interest to you,” said Josephine. “An Arcanist has asked if she could lend her services to the Inquisition.”

Lavellan pursed his lips to hide his smile. Dagna. Perfect.

“I am unfamiliar with the term,” said Cullen. “Arcanist?”

“An expert on all things magical,” explained Josephine. “I heard she’s humbled First Enchanters in Andrastian *and* Imperial circles. If the Venatori and Corypheus have claimed many experts, I see no reason why we cannot claim our own.”

“She would be invaluable,” Lavellan agreed. “Let’s accept her help then.”

“As for giving you an edge...” Josephine trailed off in thought. “You are our leader. You require the best so that our soldiers may see someone of both inspiration and aspiration.”

“It would give them peace of mind knowing their Inquisitor is capable,” he said. “It would give me peace of mind too.”

“Then leave it to me,” Leliana said. “I will ensure the best training. But first, I need to know how you fight and what manner of edge you seek.”

He already had something in mind, dearly missing his flasks and elixirs, but nodded anyway.

“We’ll spar after the meeting,” she said and her eyes glimmered. “Oh don’t make such a face. I’ll go hard on you.”

“Did you mean you’ll go easy on me?”

“No.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so.”

They continued their discussion and Lavellan felt more and more comfortable as he returned to his old role, the mantle of leadership familiar on his back. The first time he'd been made Inquisitor, he'd been uncertain. How could he lead something of this calibre? But he'd learned, he supposed.

Before the meeting ended, Lavellan asked, “Could I also get a list of those we lost at Haven? I want to personally write the condolence letters.” His hand clenched on the War Table. It was the least he could do. He'd done all he could to minimise losses, but it was impossible to leave Haven without any casualties.

Leliana and Cullen shared a heavy look.

“Of course,” said Cullen. “I’d like to help write them too.”

“Thank you.”

He called the meeting to a close then and Leliana bid him to gear up and meet her at the upper courtyard in front of the Great Hall’s stairs for their spar.

Anyway, he got his ass kicked. That wasn’t important.

Lavellan managed a few hours of sleep before the nightmares woke him. He sobbed in the cold quiet, phantom pains dancing along his left arm as he clutched it close to his chest, the mark flickering with light. His veins weren't glowing green, his skin wasn't blackening, but it damn well felt like it.

Once his sobbing settled, he forced himself out of the bedroll he'd set up in the watchtower furthest from everyone — so he wouldn't wake anybody up if he screams in his sleep. He wasn't sure if he did scream. Better not find out by startling everyone awake.

Skyhold’s dry chill slapped some awareness back into him and he focused on the goosebumps rippling across his left arm, to make sure that it was there, that it was real. He stood and forewent the shoes so he could feel the cold stones beneath his feet.

Unfortunately, Skyhold wasn't like Haven where he could cross the frozen river and hunt on the snowy fields if he couldn't sleep, so he'd taken to walking. In his past life, Varric had jokingly referred to him as the ghost of Skyhold, skulking around in the dark, watching over his wards. And he hadn't been wrong. He wouldn't be wrong now, either. Lavellan felt like a ghost, displaced from

his intended destination.

He roamed Skyhold's battlements with a watchful eye over those taking shelter in their tents in the encampments outside Skyhold. The bailey and available buildings could only fit so many. It must be freezing out there, but the soldiers had happily volunteered to stay there so that the injured, children, and the elderly could sleep in relative comfort.

The moons hung high in the sky, his breaths fogging.

It was a complete surprise when he stumbled into Cullen. Or maybe not.

Cullen started at the movement, but he relaxed once he recognised Lavellan. He gave Lavellan a once over, questioning gaze lingering over his bare feet, but he returned to looking out into the distance without a word. Lavellan stood beside him.

"Why are you awake?" Lavellan asked.

"Same reason as you, I'd wager."

"Can't hunt here."

"No," he chuckled. "Can I ask about the shoes? Lack thereof, rather."

"I wanted to feel."

Cullen nodded, understanding. Lavellan observed him. He was pale, clammy, and it wasn't because of the lighting. His hands were tucked into his pockets and Lavellan was sure they were shaking.

"You were in Kirkwall, weren't you?" Lavellan asked.

Cullen cast his eyes down. "I... Yes. And the Kinloch Circle during the Blight."

Lavellan nodded, knew the story. "Want to talk about it?"

He let the silence linger as an invitation, free to be filled or left alone.

"Not... tonight," Cullen finally answered and Lavellan nodded. "Do you want to talk about yours?"

Lavellan smiled. "Not tonight," he echoed.

And so, they fell back into work talk because that was safer and it kept their thoughts away from the darkness lingering in their minds. They talked of the state of constructions, the state of the soldiers, plans to solidify defence and offence. What worked and what didn't at Haven.

"It was brought to my attention that the Templars want ex-Knight-Captain Denam dealt with," said Cullen. "The mages are also curious about what will happen to this Magister Alexius."

He chewed on his lip. Right. The responsibility would soon fall to him. Weighing lives and judging their actions once more.

"Were you able to get them to Skyhold alright?" Lavellan asked.

"The magister came quietly. The knight-captain had to be knocked out several times so he would cooperate."

“Why am I not surprised?”

“They’re deferring to your judgement. If you do end up judging Knight-Captain Denam, I want to be there. I knew some of the knights at Therinfal, and I want to oversee his sentencing.”

Lavellan nodded. “Of course. Still, that’s already quite the responsibility. I’ve barely been Inquisitor for a day.”

“You’ve earned their trust. May I also say, the match between you and the spymaster earlier was well-received by the soldiers. It bolstered morale.”

“So Leliana turns out right again.” Lavellan grinned. “This is getting dangerous. She’s getting increasingly smug.”

“Don’t get me started,” Cullen grumbled.

Their discussion tentatively deviated from work talk, and they shared stories under the stars until the light of dawn shimmered over the snow coating the Frostbacks and stirred the early risers of Skyhold.

Lavellan regarded the stone throne, the ornate braided design on its back faded and worn. They’d cleaned it up as best as they could and had placed a covering of furs on the seat to make it more forgiving to sit on.

“I assume you’ve heard of the Templars and mages deferring to you for judgement on Magister Alexius and Knight-Captain Denam,” said Josephine as she walked up to him.

“I did.”

They stared at the throne. In his past life, his throne had been carved to look as if it were rising from the flames. A call to Andraste’s death by fire. Would they do the same thing again?

“It will be one of your responsibilities now,” she said. “You have also become a beacon of law. The Inquisition’s sovereignty is derived from the allies who validate it. You are both empowered and bound.”

And the mantle of Inquisitor came with the weight. “Let’s begin.”

Josephine nodded. “Who first?”

“Bring Denam in. Fetch Commander Cullen, too. He’ll want to be here.”

Lavellan sat. Here he was again, holding lives in his hands, dictating the future of those who would kneel before him.

Word must have gotten out about his impending judgement because the Great Hall filled with people, waiting, watching their Inquisitor. Madame Vivienne watched from her upper lounge balcony, while Solas stepped out from his rotunda. They locked eyes briefly. Lavellan looked away.

What did Solas see when Lavellan sat where he once may have?

Commander Cullen soon arrived with Knight-Captain Denam being escorted in chains behind him, Magister Alexius not far behind.

Lavellan clutched the arm of the throne but kept his face impassive. He sat through Denam's judgement (where he and Cullen sufficiently fumed at one another) and gave the Templars full sanction to determine Denam's punishment themselves. The Templars in the Hall looked at each other and nodded, watched Denam being dragged away with bitterness in their gazes.

Lavellan glanced at Cullen in a silent question. *Are you alright?* he meant to convey. Cullen must have gotten it because he gave a minute nod and waved him off.

Josephine took over as they dragged Alexius in. Dorian was in the crowd, tucked away in a corner.

Lavellan already knew what work he wanted Alexius to undertake and assigned him to serve the Inquisition as one of its magical researchers. Later, they were going to have a good, *long* chat about time magic.

"No execution?" Alexius sighed. "Very well."

"Ready a place for him to stay but leave him in the cells in the meantime."

The guards saluted and led Alexius away. Dorian and Alexius spotted each other but neither said anything. Lavellan leaned back and closed his eyes, collected himself for a moment, then stood. Josephine and Cullen walked up to him and Cullen patted his shoulder.

"Thank you, Inquisitor," said Cullen.

"It was well-handled," Josephine commended. "I know the burden of a life is not an easy one to bear, but you bore it with poise. That is to be applauded."

"Thank you," he said. "Commander, could you also ask the Templars if they can extract information from Knight-Captain Denam? Anything at all regarding Corypheus and the Red Templars."

"Of course. I'll speak to Ser Barris about it."

They left him be and the spectators in the Hall returned to their business. Solas was gone. Dorian was making his way over though so Lavellan met him halfway with a small nod.

"Are you alright?" he asked Dorian.

"Yes." He hesitated, then sighed. "No. Felix... died this morning."

Lavellan's breath stilled. Felix? Was dead? Already? But when he last saw him, he was still well enough. Lavellan let out a small breath. Shit.

"He was on borrowed time anyhow," said Dorian, eyes downcast.

"Does Alexius know?"

"He does."

That was why he was so ready for whatever fate Lavellan would give him.

"Thank you for being merciful towards Alexius," said Dorian. "Research has always made him happiest. It... It would give him something to do. No doubt he'll feel a little lost."

“What about you? I know Felix meant a lot to you.”

“I’ve come to terms with it a long time ago.”

“Still feels like shit.”

Dorian looked away, gaze fixed on something in a hazy distance. “Give me something to do, I suppose.”

“Okay,” Lavellan said. “Why don’t you come with me during my next outing?” Hawke would arrive today, and Lavellan knew she’d bring news about Stroud and the Grey Wardens. They would set off for Crestwood soon.

“Are we going somewhere?”

“I suspect soon.”

Dorian tried for a smile. “Whatever the Inquisitor commands. Congratulations, by the way. Look at me, so caught up in my own strife that I’ve forgotten to congratulate you.”

"Dorian, you just lost a good friend. I'm not going to hold that against you."

"It's a small glimmer of happiness, at the very least," said Dorian. "Ergo, congratulations. I can't think of anyone more suited for the job."

“Are you calling me bossy?”

“Far be it for me to say that.”

Lavellan would hug him, but they weren’t close in this life yet, so he gave Dorian what he hoped was a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry for your loss Dorian. Felix was a great man, and no doubt a great friend. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Thank you. Very considerate of you.” Dorian chuckled. "Careful though, you may just make me swoon."

“I’ll catch you,” Lavellan teased.

“Ha! I would’ve believed you if I didn’t see the way you look at our resident hedge mage.”

“Never mind. I’m letting you crash.” He turned and walked away and Dorian’s soft laughter followed him out the Hall.

The way he looked at Solas? How did he look at Solas? Did he have a way of looking at Solas, and did everyone see it? Did Solas? Maybe they just confused his murderous look for something else? Lavellan rubbed his face. Dorian was probably teasing.

He was so preoccupied with how he supposedly looked at Solas and the news of Felix’s death and the recent judgements that he didn’t see Varric until they crashed into each other.

“Whoa there, Glow,” said Varric and steadied him.

Lavellan staggered back and shook his head. “Creators, I’m sorry Varric. I was thinking.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Kind of felt it when you crashed into me too.” He rubbed the back of his head. “So, uh, I don’t want to dump this on you suddenly because it seemed like a bad time and everything, but the friend I told you about? The one who would know about Corypheus?”

“She's arrived?” Lavellan asked.

Varric nodded. “Yeah.” He looked around, as if checking for any eavesdroppers. Or a certain Seeker. “It’s probably safer to meet on the battlements.”

They walked to a less occupied area of the battlements where Hawke awaited, as gruff as Lavellan remembered. She turned at his arrival, exhausted and grim-faced, the default look of somebody burdened with the responsibility of others’ lives. Show him a supposed ‘hero’ who wasn’t exhausted and he’d eat his own shoe.

They shared a moment of unspoken solidarity because both understood that this entire hero gig that had been thrust upon them had taken pieces of themselves that they hadn't been ready to give. Pieces they could never retrieve it again.

Varric retrieved a bottle of ale from a nearby barrel while Hawke and Lavellan shook hands.

“You look like shit,” was her greeting.

Varric choked on his ale.

“Thanks. You too.” He gestured at her eye bags. “I think I got you beat there.”

“You do,” she said. “Bet you can’t do this.” She arched her back the slightest and it resulted in the consecutive popping of joints. Hawke grimaced.

Lavellan made a face. “No, mine just aches for a solid few months.”

“Ouch,” she said without any real sympathy and Lavellan huffed out a tired laugh. After bellyaching for a few more minutes, they moved on to the issue with the Wardens and Corypheus.

“Are you two alright to head out to Crestwood first?” he asked after. “I have a few things left to take care of here then I’ll follow. Get a head start on finding this Warden friend of yours.”

Hawke nodded. “Alright,” she said and eyed Varric. “If I hear a single complaint from you about anything inane, I’m dumping you in a river and leaving you there.”

Varric raised a hand in surrender. “Hey! I don’t complain that much.”

Hawke shot Lavellan a questioning look and he happily obliged.

“So far, he’s complained about slopes, walking too much, rain, humidity, the great outdoors, taller than usual walls, complicated Orlesian pastry, bumpy roads, caves, bears, and brontos,” Lavellan listed and Varric shot him a betrayed look.

“Has he complained about the colour green yet?” she asked.

“I can’t believe this,” said Varric. “Listen, I’m just a dwarf who knows what he wants.”

“That's called being fussy.”

“Picky,” added Lavellan.

“The Inquisitor was a cruel elf,” Varric said. “That’s how I’m describing you, hear me?”

“A cruel and accurate elf,” Lavellan amended.

Hawke snorted at Varric. “I can see why you stuck around. He’s got your sense of humour.”

Lavellan feigned offence. “Mine's more refined.”

“You’re not holding back today, are you?” Varric grumbled.

He laughed. “I mean it with love.”

“Your love hurts, Inquisitor,” said Varric.

“So dramatic.” He waved him off. “Alright, I’ll leave you two be so you can go and catch up. We’ll meet at Crestwood.”

They shared their farewells and Lavellan threw them a look over his shoulders once he was far enough, his look turning fond at the happiness Varric was radiating. Hawke wouldn’t admit it, but Lavellan suspected she shared the sentiment.

He set off to search for the companions he would take to Crestwood.

But first...

He descended into the cells. Lavellan pursed his lips when he saw the section of the cells that had been absolutely decimated by an unknown force, but he was willing to wager it was from the creation of the Veil. For now, Alexius was in an intact cell.

Lavellan neared him and he looked up.

“Inquisitor,” Alexius greeted. “Come to gloat?”

He stopped before Alexius’ cell and softened his expression.

“I heard about Felix,” he said and dipped his head. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Is that it?” He grunted. “You’ve come here to offer condolences for my loss? No need to put up a farce of sympathy, I’ll do your bidding. It’s the only thing I have left, it seems.”

“It’s not a farce. I didn’t know Felix for long but I owe my life and this future to him. He was a good man.”

His disgruntled façade fell slightly as he tipped his head back against the wall, his grief peering through.

“Better than me,” Alexius murmured.

Lavellan chewed on his lip as he debated over his next words.

“Your spell worked,” he said, carefully watching Alexius’ expression. “It did send us into the future.”

Alexius’ face changed, lit up his eyes, but it was more desperation than excitement.

“It did?” he asked and leapt to his feet, clutching the bars. The guard on duty reached for their

sword. Lavellan held up a hand to still them. “Tell me, Inquisitor, what did you see? Did Felix— Was Felix alive? Did I save him?”

Maybe Lavellan shouldn’t have brought it up in the first place. This was a terrible idea. This was just kicking Alexius while he was down.

He glowered at Lavellan’s hesitance. “Oh spit it out!”

“His body was alive, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Alexius frowned. “I— I don’t understand.”

Lavellan let out a heavy breath. “When I saw him, he barely moved, never spoke. There was no Felix left in him, just... a body forced to remain.”

Alexius bowed his head and trembled. “The Elder One promised he would live.”

“I wouldn’t even count the Elder One as alive, Alexius. A creature like him wouldn’t know what it truly meant to live.”

His grip on the bars tightened and he croaked, “Get out.”

Lavellan hesitated, lingered, wished he could find something better to say but he knew anything that came from him would just make Alexius feel worse.

“Someone will come fetch you later,” he said instead. “For now, I want the research you’ve done into time magic. I’ll have one of my mages working with you so I know you’re not omitting or altering anything.”

When Alexius said nothing, Lavellan turned and left him be to grieve and busied himself with thinking about who he wanted to bring to Crestwood rather than dwelling on that poorly handled interaction.

He returned to the battlements and watched the frozen river stretching ahead to distract himself.

Dorian he’d definitely bring. Bull...? Maybe Sera? Blackwall? He’d leave Cole for now. The residents of Skyhold would need their guardian spirit around for a while, at least until everyone was settled enough.

Sera and Bull were easy enough to find and he caught Blackwall roaming the battlements so there was an easy find too. Lavellan visited the library to search for Dorian and found that he’d already claimed one of the window alcoves for himself, had scattered it with pillows. A bottle of wine rested on a tasteful table that Dorian had shoved in the corner. Lavellan squinted at the bottle.

“Is that from Josephine’s Antivan collection?” he asked.

Dorian turned up his nose. “It was gathering *dust* in the cellar. I couldn’t possibly leave such a fine specimen alone.”

“Try not to get hungover. We’re heading out tomorrow.”

“Oh? Where to?”

“Crestwood.” Lavellan paused, then said, “Bring extra changes of clothes.”

Dorian sighed. “I already look forward to it.”

Lavellan waved him goodbye and went to look for Solas to let him know he would be working with Alexius. It was going to be strange though. Solas had accompanied him for most of their excursions.

It would be fine, he'd survived without Solas just fine for two years and then some.

He wasn't in the rotunda. Lavellan asked around but Solas had chosen this time to excel at being unassuming and nobody could point Lavellan to his whereabouts. Couldn't even remember seeing him.

"He's not Cole," Lavellan muttered as he went on the battlements again and searched for him there. He almost gave up before he spotted him in the garden. Lavellan descended into the garden and approached.

The garden was still overgrown with weeds and bushes with far too many thorns, the dry, prickly mass encroaching upon the footpath.

What had it been like when Solas had owned the castle?

Solas stood beneath the dilapidated gazebo, examining the browned and wilted vine wrapped around a column.

"This place was beautiful, once," he murmured as Lavellan neared.

Lavellan stood beside him under that broken gazebo and beheld the ruins of the garden. It was easy to clear it all away in his mind's eye, to image the garden he had grown accustomed to. He recalled the chess games with Dorian, Cullen, or Leliana, recalled Morrigan reading Kieran a book about an obscure lore or branch of magic, recalled the herb garden Lavellan had set up for the healers to use, the soldiers who would sit for a moment of peace, the Chantry sisters who would read letters from home, Varric who would tuck himself into a corner to write. The echoes were fresh in his mind. Serene. This garden had been a pocket of peace away from the loud, hassled, chaotic screaming of the world.

Solas gestured at a patch of land that had been overtaken by thorny bushes.

"They were once asters," he said. "The ancient elves would often enchant flowers to respond to music. It would dictate whether the petals would furl or unfurl, would dictate the pattern of colours splashed upon their petals. The asters would ripple in prismatic shades. Hues you wouldn't believe possible." He turned and nodded at the scraggly tree. "The leaves would chime like bells whenever the wind played between their spaces. Other days, they sighed like water."

Lavellan couldn't help but smile. It seemed the garden held fond memories for them both.

"Can you envision it?" asked Solas, voice soft in his momentary vulnerability. Lavellan had never thought to question it before. Had thought it a part of Solas' enthusiasm in sharing the memories he'd encountered in the Fade.

"I can," he agreed. "A place of refuge. You can spend a few moments here absent of worry, a few seconds for yourself or with another."

Solas smiled. "Indeed."

Lavellan's heart ached for a fleeting instant, longing for the past and the Inquisition of before. The Inquisition that wasn't here yet. The Inquisition at its prime. He hadn't realised it had been at its prime until later when things had gone to shit and he'd disbanded it. Skyhold could no longer be

their place of operations. Too close to Solas.

For now, this was fine too. Maybe he could do something better with the garden. He always did wish it had more flowers.

“I apologise,” said Solas and shook his head. “I had dreamt here and the memories of the garden struck me.”

“You know I’m always happy to hear about your stories and memories.”

He smiled. “Yes. Thank you, Inquisitor.” Lavellan made a displeased noise and Solas frowned. “That *is* your title.”

“I know it’s my title but we’re alone. You can call me by name.”

“We cannot continue being equal. You are now the leader of the Inquisition.”

“I was your friend first before becoming Inquisitor. I don’t see why this has to change or why you have to suddenly treat me like I’m just a figurehead.”

Solas wouldn’t meet his eyes. “You *are* a figurehead. Changed situations demand for changed dynamics, Inquisitor.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to pull away like this. I’m still me. Just with more responsibility.”

“And more power. You take to sitting on the throne as if you were born for it.”

And Solas was managing to strike at Lavellan’s bad mood again.

“Well, I’m glad you saw my nervousness and the way I clutched onto the arm rest for dear life as confidence,” he bit out and crossed his arms. “I thought I may have been obvious.”

“Why are you so averse to being referred to as your title? You are the Herald of Andraste, and now you are the Inquisitor. You cannot change that. It is how the people see you and it is what they expect of you.”

“Is it how you see me?” Lavellan fired back.

“What else would you be?”

Lavellan’s face fell, couldn’t reel it in fast enough to hide it.

An uneasy silence hovered.

The doubts returned. Questions of if Solas had ever truly loved him in his past life, if Solas had only returned Lavellan’s attraction and flirtations as some part of a game or a way to further his goal. Yes, wrap the Inquisitor’s heart strings around your fingers. Have the ear and heart of one of the most influential figures in history.

“I want you to know, what we had was real,” Solas said.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I find that a little hard to believe.”

“Right,” Lavellan said, voice thick. He had come here for a reason. Solas didn’t think he was more than Inquisitor and Herald? *Fine*. “I came to let you know that I’m heading to Crestwood tomorrow but I want you to stay and work with Magister Alexius, look over his research about time magic.

Find out about the magic that he'd used at Redcliffe and its implications.”

Solas finally met his eyes, caught off-guard. “You are not taking me with you?”

“Were you not listening?”

He frowned. “I was listening perfectly. I just— I have accompanied you for most of your travels. I...”

Lavellan stared, gaze cold, daring Solas to question him.

Solas looked away. “Dareth shiral.”

Lavellan lingered, just for a second, before he turned and walked away, wishing deep down that Solas would call out for him to stop, to talk it over with him, to tell Lavellan that he was more than Inquisitor and Herald to him.

Solas said nothing.

He left the garden, kept his pace steady and face impassive as he made his way through the Hall and descended into the lower levels. He locked himself in the small, old library filled with cobwebs and dusty tomes. And wept.

This was stupid. Why was he crying so damn much?

He felt worse after the cry but he couldn't let that stop him. He smoothed himself down, fixed his hair, wiped his tears, and let his eyes settle until he was sure they didn't look red and swollen, and walked out.

Inquisitor Lavellan, ready to fight.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of an interlude chapter and just settling in. With a seasoning of ouch.

I extended Skyhold because no way can the in-game one fit that many people + guests (WHERE DO THEY SLEEP?? WHERE DOES THE FOOD COME FROM? WHERE IS IT STORED? THAT KITCHEN IS TINY!). Don't get me wrong though, I still love the in-game one. Basically, pretend there's a whole extra area behind the Great Hall.

Also, please pardon me for any DA2 related things. I've only played Origins and Inquisition so I'm pretty clueless when it comes to 2 and most of my knowledge comes from watching other playthroughs, reading the wiki, or memes. My grasp of Hawke is likely going to be a tad slippery but I'll do my best.

(Having to fight the urge to rewrite the first chapters of the story because I have descended into 'overly critical of my writing' time and have lost all objectivity regarding the piece so I've elected to ignore my screaming brain by burying it under cups of coffee and tea and making moodboards. I'll listen to it when it finally learns to *behave* and convey things in a more constructive manner, thank you and goodbye you wet, noodley lump of fat.)

The terror of the dreamless

Chapter Notes

Hullo I've been getting people saying that they've binge read this fic in a few days or so which is so incredibly touching, but I also got worried (because I know I skip out on sleep or something when I'm binge reading haha).

So I've gone back to add self-care checkpoints every ten chapters starting from this one! This is a reminder to walk around/stretch for a bit, drink water, have some food if it's meal time, or go to sleep if you're able to :) Thank you for your support.

Without further ado...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

nocturnal and witless—

After notifying the rest of his companions about where he was going and asking Vivienne to help Josephine with designing the Great Hall, he went looking for Cassandra. The soldiers pointed him towards the armoury where she was last seen with Varric.

Oh. Oh no.

Lavellan hurried into the armoury, the sound of scuffling and chairs screeching echoing in the space. He hurried up the stairs just in time to see Cassandra pull her fist back.

“You conniving little shit!” she accused.

“Hey!” Lavellan yelled and moved between them, caught Cassandra’s wrist just as she threw the punch. She stared at him, incredulous. Varric positioned himself behind a table.

“You’re taking *his* side?” she asked.

"Look at her, she's lost it!" Varric cried.

“That’s enough,” Lavellan scolded. She wrenched her hand away from his grip and paced, but she didn't breach the one-table difference between her and Varric.

“We needed someone to lead this Inquisition,” said Cassandra.

Varric gestured at Lavellan. “It *has* a leader. And you’re the one who elected him!”

“And I do not regret this decision, but Leliana and I thought Hawke’s disappearance tied with Warden-Commander Tabris’ disappearance. But *no*. It was just you. You hid her from us. She could have been at the Conclave. She could have saved Most Holy.”

“Then Hawke would be dead too!”

Lavellan rubbed his face and sighed. “What’s done is done,” he said. He hadn't been able to stop the Conclave explosion, and something told him that without it, the Inquisition would have never

been born. Not in this way, at least. “And Varric’s right. If Hawke had been at the Conclave, she’d be dead and where would we be now? She’s one of the only people who knows anything about what we’re facing.”

Cassandra scowled at Lavellan. “But even after the Conclave when we needed Hawke, Varric kept her secret.”

“She’s with us now!” said Varric. “We’re on the same side.”

“We all know whose side you’re on, Varric,” she spat. “It will always be yours. You’re a selfish, lying snake.”

“Cassandra!” Lavellan snapped “Enough. You’re being too harsh.”

“*Harsh?*”

Lavellan turned to Varric. “And Varric, I know you wanted to protect Hawke and I get it. Really, I do. But from now on, no more secrets. Any information that will help against Corypheus, you tell us.”

Varric hung his head, heaved out a sigh. “I understand.”

“Do you?” Cassandra snarked, vindictive in a way that Lavellan rarely saw.

Varric glared up at her. “You’ve made your point, Seeker.”

“Just...” She turned away and shook her head, the heat in her voice vanishing, replaced by a defeated slump to her shoulders. “Just go.”

Varric scoffed and stalked off with a final, muttered, “You people have done enough to her.”

Once Varric’s footsteps faded and the door to the armoury shut behind him, Cassandra turned from her spot and fell into a chair, head in her hands. Lavellan pulled up a seat in front of her.

“Hey,” he said gently. “Talk to me.”

“Why? You’ve made it clear that you’ve taken Varric’s side.”

“I wasn’t taking sides,” he sighed. “However angry or desperate to blame something you are, that was no reason to go after Varric like that. You could argue this is none of my business but you two are members of the Inquisition and I’m the Inquisitor. I have a duty to do right by both of you.” He paused, then shrugged. “Okay, that’s a lie. I’m butting in because you’re both my friends and I want to look out for both of you.”

That softened her. Somewhat. “If I’d just made him understand what was at stake...” She looked up at him. “But I didn’t.”

“Let’s say you tracked Hawke down. What then?”

“Honestly? I don’t think she would have agreed to become Inquisitor anyway. She supported the mage rebellion. I doubt she would trust me.” Cassandra hung her head again, lips twisting in self-deprecation. “But this isn’t about Hawke or Varric, not truly. I should have been smarter, more careful. Maker, I’m such a fool.”

“Everyone in the Inquisition is a fool, honestly.”

Cassandra offered him a wry smile. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"More at home, maybe. The fools who dared to change things, remember?" He smiled back.

"Look, we're all just... trying to do the right thing, looking out for people we care about. But we're all just fumbling along too. We're bound to make mistakes sometimes."

"We cannot afford to make them often."

"No," he agreed. "But when we do and it couldn't be helped, we shouldn't beat ourselves up with a club and then bash our head against the wall for good measure."

That got a weak laugh out of her. "I'm predictable, I know. Maybe if we found Hawke or Tabris, the Maker wouldn't have needed to send you." She stood and he followed. "But you're right. We do not know what will come and we can only do our best. You're... more than I could have hoped for."

That startled a laugh out of him.

She huffed. "I'm being serious!"

"I know. I'm sorry, I just—" He rubbed the back of his neck with a nervous chuckle. "Well, at least my stumbling around hasn't made you lose faith in me just yet."

"I have never lost faith in you," she told him with a weary yet sincere smile and Lavellan matched the weariness of it with his own. The light of dusk cast severe shadows on their faces, revealing the true extent of their exhaustion

"Then you're a fool," he said.

"I am about to march with you tomorrow morning against an ancient god, so yes, I suppose you could consider me a fool." She clutched her fist close to her chest and bowed her head. His throat dried. "Wherever you lead us," she said, an echo of her sentiment from so many years ago.

"Don't," he said softly. "I will not lead you to death."

"I will follow, regardless." Her smile turned wry. "But I would not mind if you fought to live."

"Isn't that what I'm doing?"

"Solas is not the only one walking the path of death, Inquisitor." Cassandra raised her head, a conflict of emotions warring in her eyes. All of them sad. "You have made your own."

"Inquisitor?" Cassandra asked, pulling him back into the present. He met her worried frown.

"Oh, sorry. I just remembered— Well, never mind." He looked out the small window and watched Varric's distant, retreating form, placed the painful memories aside. "Apologise to Varric, alright? Before he goes to Crestwood."

She pursed her lips and looked away. But he knew Cassandra. She'd always admit when she'd been in the wrong and would always seek to amend it. Always.

"If he will accept my apology."

"It's not about the acceptance of apology. It's the fact that you were remorseful and want to let them know you are."

“True enough,” she said. “You say he is departing for Crestwood?”

“As am I. We’re searching for this lead of Hawke’s.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?”

He shook his head. “No, I was hoping you could investigate Lord Seeker Lucius and his whereabouts. We know the Lord Seeker at Therinfal was a demon so that begs the question of where the real one is.”

Cassandra nodded. “Perhaps I could work with Leliana to find where the missing Seekers are as well.”

“Thank you, Cassandra.” They walked out of the armoury, relieved that she’d cooled off significantly. “Try to do something to take your mind off of things for a moment. Time to rest your mind. Maybe read a book,” he said, knew exactly how that would make her react.

She sputtered. “We’ve no time for frivolous things.”

“There’s always time for frivolous things.” He looked down, recalled how he used to throw himself into his work. “The world won’t give you time, you have to find a pocket for yourself.”

Cassandra was quiet as she turned this over, then she sighed in acquiescence. “I will think on it, Inquisitor.”

Lavellan walked with Cassandra around the bailey for a few minutes longer, talking about the general mischiefs they’d witnessed so far in Skyhold, sharing a few more things about each other’s past. It relaxed him enough to make him feel like he could do this. He later consoled and reassured Varric before seeing him and Hawke off and discovered that Cassandra had already apologised. Varric appreciated this at least, but he was still pissed, which was fair enough.

When night fell and Lavellan slept, he woke up gasping in the dead of the night, a mantra of apologies falling from his lips wet with tears.

Crestwood was damp, dark, and miserable, the green of the lake rift refracting and glinting like emeralds in the water. They fought back the undead threatening Crestwood and later met its mayor. Lavellan may have been fooled by the act before, but now he could see the clearest signs of deceit. Happened when you kept close company with liars.

“There’s something about him,” Bull mumbled beside Lavellan.

“He’s lying,” he agreed. “Something’s got him uncomfortable about that dam.”

“Not bad, Mercy.”

“I’ve been around better liars,” he said and walked ahead.

He disliked Crestwood. The Veil was too thin and it skittered over his skin, made him restless, and that just brought back memories of—

“You have become important to me, more important than I could have imagined.”

Lavellan stopped suddenly and his companions stared at him.

“You alright, Mercy?” Bull asked.

“Stop. You are perfect exactly as you are.”

“No, I don’t like it here,” he said, didn’t elaborate. This was partly why he didn’t want Solas tagging along either.

“Veil smells damp,” agreed Sera.

“I’ll say,” grumbled Dorian, hair sticking to his forehead from the rain.

Bull cooed at him. “What’s the matter Vint? Not enough slaves to massage your footsies?”

“My footsies are freezing, thank you.”

“Behave, you two,” said Lavellan. “Come on, let’s go. We’ve got a keep to storm. The rest of the Inquisition forces have arrived to help us.”

They had to make their business here quick. Drain the lake, close the rift, find and speak to Stroud, and fuck right back off.

Before he lost his damn mind.

The Inquisition flag fluttered in the strong winds of the mild storm, claiming Caer Bronach for their own. Lavellan could already hear the Exalted Council’s faint arguments about the Inquisition’s expanding military might, and frowned in thought.

On one hand, Caer Bronach provided a fantastic strategic position for Leliana and the Inquisition’s spies. It was on a trading route from Ferelden to Orlais. Merchants talked. Merchants also sold things. On the other hand, the Inquisition was an independent organisation encroaching on Ferelden property and the political implications of this would bite them back in the ass in the future. If the Exalted Council was deemed necessary again.

Screw it. Let the old, cantankerous men argue. He'd deal with it later.

“The Iron Bull’s found the door to the dam controls,” said Dorian from behind, startling him, but he managed to hide his physical reaction. “But this storm is wretched. Not a good idea to go outdoors.”

Lavellan looked at him, ignored how his heart was pounding in alarm. “You look like a cat that’s been pushed into a bath,” he said.

“You just had to remind me,” Dorian grumbled. “The wet is sticking to my skin even after a change of clothes.”

“Welcome to the south.”

“I’m terribly charmed,” he drawled. “Come now, stop sulking here in silence. This keep is dreadfully quiet and cleaning up the dead bodies is ghastly.”

“*You* cleaned up dead bodies?”

“Well, no. I watched your forces clean up the dead bodies.”

Dorian led him away from the windows and to a large room that the Highwaymen Bandits had fashioned into a common room. There was already a fire roaring in the fireplace.

Blackwall was wiping down his armour while Sera had left her shoes to dry out in front of the fire.

“When d’you think it’ll end?” Sera asked.

“The storm? Probably a day,” said Blackwall. “This one’s pretty mild. We can probably set out again in the morning.”

They had supper, a little something they’d picked up from the village, then settled into their own activities. Surprisingly, Blackwall fell asleep first. Sera would have drawn on his face but there was nothing to draw with so she and Dorian ended up competing over who could come up with the most elaborate insult instead. Meanwhile, Lavellan ended up in a corner with Bull.

Bull was nursing a drink in his hand, silent as he stared at the fireplace while Lavellan whittled away at a block of wood he’d picked up at Skyhold.

“You didn’t bring Solas?” Bull asked.

Lavellan paused his whittling, then resumed. “I asked him to work with Alexius. Make sure the magister doesn’t try to feed us false information. Why?”

“Nothing.” Bull shrugged. “Just used to seeing you two travelling together. You work well with each other.”

“Solas can work well with anyone. That’s one of his strengths.”

“That’s true.”

Lavellan squinted at the block in his hand. Was he after a shape or was he just wasting another block of wood and dulling his knives?

“You two fought, didn’t you?” Bull eventually asked over the din.

“What makes you say that?” Lavellan asked, tone even.

He chuckled as he swirled the drink in his tankard. “Solas looked real unhappy when I last saw him. And you get this look in your eyes. It’s a ‘Solas has pissed me off again’ kind of look. Can’t explain it.”

“Do you really have one of my facial expressions catalogued as the one dedicated to when I’m pissed at Solas?”

“Listen, I have to look out for it just in case I need to take a step back. Or start some bets.”

Lavellan kicked his foot and Bull chuckled.

Sera cursed at Dorian and accused him of making words up. Dorian cackled softly. Lavellan watched them with a small smile, then returned to carving into the wood in his hand. Something was taking shape. He had no idea what yet though so maybe he’d keep at it.

“What about?” Bull asked.

“Huh?”

“The fight.”

“Oh.” *What else would you be?* His wrist flicked sharply on a particular carve. “Differences in opinion.”

Bull laughed. “Yeah, Mercy, that’s usually what happens in fights. What was the difference in opinion?”

Lavellan paused. Was it wise telling Bull?

At Lavellan’s extended silence, he raised both arms up in surrender, tankard and all. “Or not. No pressure.”

What harm would it do? It wasn’t anything important that Bull could use, and if he was going to betray them later anyway, it wasn’t like he would care.

Lavellan hesitated, stared at Bull. Was it predetermined already that Bull would betray them? Lavellan was already operating on that assumption but was that unfair of him? Were there variables he hadn’t considered?

“A disagreement about my title and my response to it,” Lavellan said slowly, testing the waters. Bull nodded, patient. “He calls me Inquisitor even when we’re alone. Or Herald when he wants to piss me off. I wanted him to call me by name like he used to before I became Inquisitor.”

“What’d he say?”

“Got annoyed at me for being so averse to being called by my title. Went on about how it’s how people see me and when I asked him if that’s how he saw me, he said, and I quote, ‘What else would you be?’” The words sent another lance of hurt through his heart but at least he wasn’t teary this time.

Bull grimaced into his drink. “Damn.”

Lavellan laughed in agreement. Damn, indeed.

“So I got angry at him. That’s not the reason why he isn’t with us though. I really did want him to work with Alexius.”

“You ever notice Solas goes out of his way to distance himself from us?” asked Bull.

“Always.”

“It’s almost like he’s afraid of something. Afraid of us? Could make sense. He *is* an apostate and suddenly he’s surrounded by all these Templars and Circle mages.”

Afraid of realising this world was real.

Afraid of continuing his plan even if the world were to become real.

“Who knows what goes on in that head of his,” Lavellan said instead.

“Could be why he doesn’t call you by name. Dynamic imbalance too.”

“He didn’t have to be such a shit about it,” he grumbled. “I’m not *just* Inquisitor. Maybe I can punch him then I can be the angry Inquisitor. Upgrade myself.”

Bull chuckled. “You wouldn’t.”

“Punch him? Watch me.”

“You’re pissed because you care, Mercy.” He downed what’s left of his drink and sighed in contentment. “Get it clarified when we come back. Cool off a bit.”

“Yeah,” he murmured, unconvinced.

Bull stood and stretched. “Well, I’m going to try and get some sleep. Nothing else to do. Unless you wanna keep talking?”

Lavellan shook his head and smiled. “You go on and get some rest.”

“And you?”

“I’ll... try.”

He stared at Lavellan for a while longer before he turned and rested on his pile of hay. Bull fell asleep easy and woke up even easier, alert and rearing. Lavellan would envy the skill if he didn’t know why it was necessary for Bull to be that way.

Soon, Dorian and Sera bid Lavellan goodnight and he tried to sleep then. Really, he did. He managed it but he awoke again at some point in the night, out of breath and on the verge of tears while his companions slept soundly around him. At least he hadn’t woken them.

Lavellan sat up with his hand covering his face, did the technique Josephine showed him to calm himself down, the stone clutched tight in one hand.

The fireplace was dim with only a soft flicker of flame licking across what little fuel was left. Lavellan fed it more wood and fanned it back to a brighter glow.

He watched the lambent flames curl then retreated to a corner and took out the block of wood and his carving knives. Something to keep his mind preoccupied and his hands moving. The motions emptied his mind as he listened to the soft patter of rain, the occasional roll of thunder, the whispers of the Well, and the crackling pop of the flames.

Dawn soon flooded the room with soft gauzes of light, falling across the floor and his companions’ sleeping faces in gentle blades.

The wooden block in his hand had taken on the crude form of a howling wolf.

He knocked his head back against the wall and groaned.

Old Crestwood was a monument to forgotten sins and unearthed regrets and it all left a rotten tang in Lavellan’s mouth. He tasted the death in the air and the Veil was also worryingly battered here. He was somewhat glad for the elven artefact he’d spotted and activated. Lavellan resisted experimenting with it and the Anchor again. Solas was right. Lavellan might accidentally bring the

Veil crashing down on them and then where would they be?

At the mercy of the gods Solas had put in the longest time-out of history.

They stumbled across the spirit of Command, who pointed at Lavellan, barking in its imperious rage.

“You there!” it demanded. “Change! Why aren’t you changing? I bid you to!”

Bull made a sound crossed between confusion and incredulity. Sera took three giant steps away.

“I can’t,” said Lavellan, regarding it with curiosity. “This is the physical realm. It doesn’t change like the Fade.”

“Ugh. Then what good is it?”

“If only Solas were here,” muttered Blackwall.

“Fascinating,” murmured Dorian. “It must be a lost spirit, drawn to the death in Old Crestwood.”

“Silence! Let the other one talk.” It turned to Lavellan, bending the light around it while glowing a wispy orange. “If this realm doesn’t change, then what’s the use of it?”

Lavellan blinked. “If you’re physical, you adhere to the rules of this realm. That way, you’re able to change it, somehow. It just changes in a different way. Not by will.”

His companions stared at him and Lavellan scowled.

“I listen to Solas sometimes,” he said in his defence.

“What manner of spirit are you then?” asked Dorian. “All spirits and demons encompass a concept. Compassion, pride, envy...”

“Demon?” it shrieked. “Those dolts who would suck this world dry? You insult me. I am called to higher things, higher than those soft virtues you dared call me. I am Command!” It faced Lavellan again. “You. I felt your coming. Is there something alike in us?”

“Maybe,” he conceded.

“He does command the Inquisition,” said Blackwall.

“I knew it!” it said. “Make your armies ready. Cleave to your loyal servants. You will need them all.”

A chill wracked his spine.

“If you hate this place so much, have you tried leaving?” Bull asked.

“I will not be denied. I will not leave until something obeys me.”

Lavellan sighed. “Very well. What command do you have?”

“What are you doing?” Sera hissed.

“It’s not leaving until it’s obeyed,” said Lavellan. “I can always refuse.”

Command sniffed in clear disdain and disapproval but continued. “I have but one command. A

demon of rage had the gall to chase me across the lake. Destroy it and you shall be rewarded.”

“Rewarded how?” asked Bull. “By you piggybacking into one of our heads?”

“Yours holds no interest.”

There was a pause, then Dorian snickered into his hand, turning away with trembling shoulders. Blackwall cleared his throat.

Bull shrugged. “Works for me!”

And that was how they found themselves in a tunnel of dwarven architecture, battling a large Rage demon. That very tunnel also led to the rift in the lake so all’s well that ends well.

Until a Terror caught him by surprise and cleaved an impressive slash across his torso.

Alright. Then again, maybe not.

“Mercy!” cried Bull. “Hang on!”

Lavellan rolled away from the Terror, spilling blood all over the water. He forced himself up, opened a sunder above the Terror while Sera’s arrows found their mark in the demon’s chest. It shrieked even as the sunder pulled it back into the Fade.

A wraith hit him with a ball of energy and the force of it jarred his bones. His jaw locked from the impact. Lavellan crashed.

He sputtered at the stale water and wiped it away from his lips with a dry patch of his sleeve. A barrier shimmered around him.

Lavellan pressed a hand against the wound and kept fighting, opened sunder after sunder. This was the last wave of demons. He could make it. Had to make it.

His vision flickered in and out of focus.

“Done!” cried Sera. “Close the frigging thing!”

Lavellan threw his hand up, couldn’t even focus on where the rift was and just relied on the connection between it and the Anchor. He felt it close.

He swayed.

Someone supported him, solid by his side. Broken voices whispered.

“Hurry— Stop him bleeding!”

“Working on it, Sera!”

Lavellan blacked out.

He woke up in a tent. Hawke was sitting beside him with a map in her hands. She noticed him stirring and nodded at him.

“Hawke?” he croaked, voice and sight bleary. “Where...?”

“Back at an Inquisition camp,” she said. “Varric and I were on the way back to let you know we found where my contact was. Then your friends—” she jerked her head outside— “came hollering for me to help heal you. Are they always that lively?”

Lavellan squinted at the brightness and crossed his arm over his eyes, the pain across his torso now nothing but a dull, throbbing ache.

“Yes,” he said.

She snorted. “Mine as well.”

“Well, if Varric is one of your friends, I can imagine the rest.”

“Whatever you’re imagining, make it ten times worse,” she grunted but he could discern the affection in her tone.

Lavellan sat up. Hawke didn’t fuss or try to ease him back down, which he was immensely grateful for.

“Thanks,” he said. “Hope it wasn’t too much trouble. Last time mages tried to heal me, apparently I rejected the magic and started thrashing and screaming?”

Her brow raised in question. “No. You accepted mine alright. Your friend helped. The one with the groomed moustache. Though he exhausted most of his mana.”

“The one with the groomed moustache. He’ll be thrilled that that’s how you remember him.” Lavellan peeled his blankets back and lifted the loose tunic he was in. Not even a scar on his torso. Hawke and Dorian were good. “So, this Warden contact?”

“Roughly east of here. He’s hiding in a cave. He’ll be expecting us.”

“How long was I out for?”

Hawke hummed. “Most of the day.”

“Well then, let’s get going. Not a moment to lose.”

“Alright.”

She left the tent so he could get gear up, and when he got out, the sun’s base was close to the horizon. His companions were scattered around camp, but they looked up at his arrival.

“No,” was all Bull said before he stood and herded Lavellan back into the tent. “I don’t think so. You need to rest.”

Lavellan dug his heels in. “We need to meet with the contact! Hawke gave me the clear!”

“I did,” agreed Hawke and Bull hesitated.

Varric jumped in. “Yeah, don’t listen to her. She’d keep pushing on even if she had an arrow in her gut and was bleeding out of twenty different holes.”

“I’m *fine*,” Lavellan insisted and patted his torso. “Not even a scar. Hawke and Dorian patched me up just fine.”

“Don’t be a shit,” said Sera. “You barely get sleep and the next demon who says boo in your face will snag you right in the arse because you’re a nob.”

“It was an accident! It caught me by surprise!”

“Nothing catches you by surprise,” grunted Bull. “To the point that Solas had to put a warning bell on his staff so you wouldn’t shiv him if he comes up behind you.”

Lavellan huffed. “I’m just cautious.”

“You’re not helping your case, is what you’re being,” laughed Blackwall.

“Instead of seeing this Warden fop, make him come here instead,” Sera suggested.

Hawke shook her head. “Not a good idea. He’s a little wanted by the Grey Wardens.”

“Well, Glowy isn’t going anywhere,” said Varric. “He needs to rest. Actually sleep.”

“And we need to meet the Warden,” said Lavellan.

They bickered. Honestly, it was him versus everyone. Hawke just watched on with her arms crossed and a vaguely amused glimmer in her eyes. Dorian was already fast asleep in his tent but Lavellan entertained that maybe Dorian would be on his side if he'd been awake.

“Maker, shut it!” came Dorian’s disgruntled voice as he snapped his tent flap open, glaring, though it lost its edge due to of his grogginess. “Just let him go!”

See?

“But he needs to rest,” Varric protested.

“Then don’t let him fight! Toddlers, the lot of you. Don’t you know compromise?”

Or not.

“As if that will work,” snorted Lavellan.

It worked.

Lavellan crossed his arms and harrumphed as his companions cleared away the rogue bandits who had ambushed them on the way. Any time he tried to join, Dorian would tut beside him. He sulked further and tapped his toes in impatience.

“I am not a child to be babysat,” he grumbled.

“Try not to act it then,” was Dorian’s sunny reply.

They made it to the cave where Stroud had camped and Lavellan’s disgruntlement vanished, replaced by growing dread. The last time he saw Stroud was when—

Too many eyes, dangling legs, not everybody could leave.

A choice soon or they were all dead. One name or the other. The name he uttered tasted like thorns as it lacerated his tongue.

“Stroud.”

A piece sacrificed. A game of chess against death.

Hawke knocked a specific rhythm on the wooden door and it opened and Lavellan had to try and catch his breath. There Stroud stood, wary and alert but welcoming as he ushered everyone in.

“Were you followed?” he asked when he shut the door.

“Bandits,” said Hawke, “but not the Wardens. I brought the Inquisitor.”

“Good.” He turned to Lavellan and tipped his head. “I am Warden Stroud, Inquisitor, and I am at your service.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Warden Stroud,” he said and swore to himself that he’d find a way to save him, this time. “I’ve a few questions if you don’t mind my asking.”

It was all posturing on Lavellan’s end. He just asked the right questions for his companions’ sake so they would be filled in.

They were on the subject of the Calling when Bull turned to Blackwall.

“Shit, you’ve been dealing with that this whole time? You good?”

And Stroud frowned, eyeing Blackwall, who did a commendable job of trying not to fidget. He hadn’t brought Blackwall along last time so this hadn’t been an issue, and now Lavellan wanted to smash his head against the cave wall for his stupidity.

As everyone’s attention shifted to Blackwall, Lavellan caught Stroud’s eye and made an aborting motion with his hand. Wardens could sense other Wardens. And the significant *lack* of the taint in somebody claiming to be a Warden.

“The Calling doesn’t scare me,” said Blackwall. “And worrying about it only gives it power. Anything Corypheus does will only strengthen my resolve.”

Thankfully, Stroud made no comment, and continued.

Lavellan wanted to shake Blackwall by the shoulders.

“I’ve been monitoring the Wardens’ movements,” said Stroud. “There’s movement in the Western Approach. I’m going to go there and investigate. I’ll let you know when something comes up.”

“We’ll send forward scouts when we return to Skyhold,” said Lavellan. “We’ll make sure the Inquisition’s presence remains subtle for now. Help you keep a close eye on the situation.”

Stroud nodded. “That will do. Thank you, Inquisitor.”

“Need an extra hand?” asked Hawke.

“Or you could stay at Skyhold,” Lavellan offered. She frowned at the suggestion.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she murmured. “Champion or not, they know I practiced blood magic at some point.”

“You *what*?” Dorian asked.

Hawke glowered at him. “I don’t repeat myself. This is exactly what I mean. I don’t want to cause discomfort at your base, Inquisitor. Nor do I want to be at the end of it.”

Lavellan faltered, glanced at Varric.

Varric raised his arms. “Oh no, none of that Glow. Hawke does what she wants. Besides, she’ll be happier travelling and I’ll see her again anyway. It’s ridiculously hard trying to get rid of her.”

Hawke smiled.

Lavellan relented. “Alright. But the offer stands if you change your plans.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” she said in a way that was clear that her mind was made.

When his companions engaged in a discussion about the recent information, Stroud beckoned Lavellan over. This was likely going to be about Blackwall.

They stayed in a secluded area of the cave — as secluded as it could get anyway — and Blackwall glanced at them, nervous.

“Inquisitor, about this Warden friend of yours...” Stroud trailed off.

“I know,” said Lavellan. “He’s...” He looked down. In his past life, he’d admired Blackwall, admired his loyalty, his unshakeable morality. His belief in a better world and being a better person had stuck with Lavellan, and when he’d thought of the word ‘honour’, the first person who’d come to mind had been Blackwall.

And when the charade had fallen and all had been brought to light in that dark and moonlit cell, Lavellan had bowed his head and said his goodbye.

“He wants to be a better man,” Lavellan said. “He was meant to be a Grey Warden, already conscripted by the real Warden Blackwall, but the Warden died on the way. Ambushed by Darkspawn. He feared the Wardens would accuse him of killing Blackwall but was inspired by Blackwall giving his life to save him.” He sighed. “I don’t know what to do about him just yet, but I trust him.”

Stroud frowned. “Even if he’s lying to you? This could be detrimental, Inquisitor. Others may need knowledge from him. Knowledge he cannot provide.”

Lavellan put a hand to his chin in thought. “Unless he completes his Joining.”

“Begging your pardon, but there is still something suspicious happening regarding the Calling and Corypheus. That would not be ideal.”

“No, you’re right, not now. But when things settle. Maybe he can complete his Joining and become a proper Grey Warden.”

Stroud made an uncertain noise. “Perhaps.”

“He doesn’t know I know. As for the information he cannot provide, if you’d be willing, could you at least brief him about the Wardens and how they work?”

“Grey Warden business is strictly confidential.”

“I know. It’s just... a suggestion. I understand if it’s too much to ask.”

Stroud looked away for a moment, watching the warm, pulsing glow of a cluster of deep mushrooms growing on the cave wall, before he sighed.

“Very well, Inquisitor. But only if his fate does indeed return to the Grey Wardens. *When* we sort out what’s happening.” Not if.

Lavellan nodded. “Thank you, Stroud. I’m sorry, too. Don’t tell him I know. It would bring up too many questions I don’t think I can yet answer.”

He gave Lavellan a curious look but said nothing more about it. “I shall speak to him in private then.”

When Lavellan and his company was ready to leave, Stroud called for Blackwall. Poor man looked like he was about to plummet into his own grave as he walked towards Stroud.

“Why’s he staying?” asked Varric.

“Warden to Warden things,” said Stroud. “Very confidential. Don’t worry, I will return him in one piece.”

“Go on,” said Blackwall and Lavellan commended his steady tone. “I’ll meet you back at the keep.”

Lavellan wished Blackwall good luck as they exited the cave. Night had already fallen.

“So Dorian,” said Bull, “looks like that Warden’s beaten you on the ‘stache department.”

“The *what* department?” asked Dorian before it dawned on him and his expression soured. “Oh. Yes. Funny, you.”

Lavellan turned east on the road and earned a questioning sound from Varric.

“Keep’s that way,” he said.

“Going back to Crestwood village,” said Lavellan. “Letting the mayor know we have the rift sealed.” Though he knew the mayor was gone. No matter, it was for the villagers’ sakes.

The mayor was indeed gone when they arrived. Sera cursed up a storm as Lavellan gently broke the news to the villagers, showed them the letter that the mayor had left behind, and promised that he would help exhume and cremate the bodies from Old Crestwood.

“We’re finding that pissbag right?” asked Sera.

“And then some,” Lavellan promised.

Bull and Dorian bullied Lavellan into sleeping, but he woke up again after a few measly hours. Everyone else was already asleep and couldn’t exactly stop him from sneaking out.

Lavellan settled on the battlements and returned to carving under the moonlight, submitting to the

fact that his wood carving was indeed a howling wolf.

His mind wandered to the events from earlier in the day and his lips twisted bitterly as he recalled the fight at the lake rift. His companions had been right. He'd gotten sloppy today. He put the carving down and leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, but something nagged at him, urged him that there was something he'd forgotten.

He shot up and his eyes snapped open.

The Command spirit!

Was it wise heading out at this ungodly time of the night?

No, but Lavellan's judgement wasn't exactly superb right now, so he snuck into the common room to gear up, and left. He was almost out the keep's gatehouse when a stern, "No, you don't," stopped him. Lavellan turned and found Blackwall scowling at him, arms crossed, looking every bit like an unhappy father who'd caught their child sneaking out during the night.

"Oh, welcome back," said Lavellan.

"Where do you think you're going at this hour?" Blackwall asked.

Lavellan chuckled nervously. "Was going to go talk to the Command spirit?"

Blackwall stared at him, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "Andraste's tits," he muttered to himself. "You should be resting."

"Nightmares," said Lavellan. "I have them a lot. Can't exactly sleep."

He paused, thought it over, then said, "I'll come with you."

"Only if you don't give me a lecture on the way. Had enough of that from Dorian and Bull."

Blackwall chuckled and the two walked. "I doubt you'd listen."

"You know me well."

They made their way back to Old Crestwood in silence, again sitting in the middle of awkward and comfortable.

Old Crestwood was eerie at night, but at least the ruined village could now breathe in peace. No more demons who would possess the dead.

When Lavellan met the Command spirit, it imparted him with... something. It wrapped around him, faint needles upon his skin, before dissipating.

"Use it well," it said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"To make enemies fear you, to make allies respect you. To make mighty armies tremble beneath your imperious gaze, to help the helpless find shelter in your grace. Nothing you don't already have, but I will help them see. But worry not. Even the commanding must command from where they are unseen. Wish it, and you will be a beacon. Wish otherwise, and you will not be."

And it disappeared, left the Veil wavering in its wake before settling, strengthened by the artefact

he'd activated earlier.

"I understood nothing about that," admitted Blackwall.

"I vaguely did? Must be an aura to help with the whole leadership thing." Lavellan shook his head. "Well, let's head back."

"You seem to know a lot about spirits and the Fade. Not as much as Solas, but still."

"Sister's a mage. She tells me these things." True enough. "And like I said, I listen to Solas."

Blackwall eyed him as they walked.

"What were you and Warden Stroud talking about?" he asked. Guy really forewent the subtlety, huh?

"More about Corypheus. Was letting him know about what happened at Haven." Lavellan raised a brow at him. "You?"

Blackwall cleared his throat. "Confidential Warden things," he mumbled.

"Ah," said Lavellan and said nothing more on the subject.

"He made me promise," Blackwall said under his breath and Lavellan pretended he didn't hear it.

Seawater lapped on the far shore, misty and frothy-edged, strings of diamond moonlight shimmering on its turbulent surface.

They spent longer than he'd expected at Crestwood — over a week. In between helping the Inquisition establish themselves at Caer Bronach, helping Crestwood village get back up on its feet after the mayor's disappearance and the revelation of Old Crestwood, getting rid of the remainder of the Highwaymen, closing rifts, tracking dead Inquisition spies, and even stumbling into Venatori and Red Templars scouring about an elven ruin—

Well, they had their hands full.

Lavellan refused to look at the wolf statue near that elven ruin. He already had another wolf effigy on him. The wooden carving. Lavellan had always adored the detail work so he'd gone a step further and carved the fur. He was quite proud of it. A wolf, howling skywards, complete with a notch on its hackles to loop a string through. He wanted to carve two more since he couldn't leave one on its own. In a way, it was his message to Solas that he didn't need to be alone. Shouldn't be.

Lavellan was still angry at him though.

He wrote back and forth to his advisors, mostly Leliana, updating them on the state of Crestwood and tracking down the traitor among Leliana's agents.

Hawke and Stroud said their goodbyes midweek and set off for the Western Approach.

And over the course of that week, not once did Lavellan get more than a few hours of sleep every night. He was feeling its toll. His reaction time was slowing, he was quick to irritate, and he'd cried

far too often while carving the wolf.

Dorian and Bull would hover over him like offended mother hens, and he wasn't blind to Sera's strange tactic of trying to bore him with stories. But this was Sera. Any stories she'd tell would make him cackle.

Lavellan would sometimes doze during random moments of the day without meaning to, but those stolen naps were never satisfactory.

One night, a nightmare woke him once again and he wept.

He was so *tired*.

It was Varric who he'd accidentally woken up. Varric who'd wrapped a blanket around Lavellan and murmured stories to him to take his mind off it and maybe help him sleep. It *should* have helped him sleep. Stories helped him sleep.

Not this time.

Two nights later, a small supply of sleeping elixirs arrived at Caer Bronach and Dorian pushed them into his chest. Lavellan read the letter tied to one of the flasks.

Inquisitor,

I brewed these myself and it should hopefully suffice. These will induce a dreamless sleep although it is a temporary measure. It will do for two nights.

Solas

Lavellan must have been so out of it because all he blurted out was, "He's got nice handwriting." Followed by, "But I'm still mad at him."

"Alright, let's tuck the baby into bed," said Varric.

Lavellan glared. "I'm your boss."

"Yes, yes. The baby boss."

"Toddler," Dorian amended and the two of them grabbed him.

"I am your Inquisitor! Unhand me!"

"Oh, what's this?" Bull asked as he stumbled into Varric and Dorian attempting to drag a thrashing Lavellan. "Need some help?"

"All yours, Tiny," said Varric.

Bull hauled Lavellan up and threw him over his shoulders as if he were a sack of onions.

"Put me down!"

"Oh, I will," said Bull airily. "Let's find your cot."

He chucked Lavellan unceremoniously down on the cot despite his loud protests and Sera came barrelling in with a blanket that she shoved over his face as she pushed him down.

“Alright pissypants, hold still,” she said.

“It’s the middle of the damn day!” he yelled at them. “I’ve got things left to do—”

“Either drink this elixir yourself or we’ll force-feed you and it will be embarrassing for all of us, I’m sure,” said Dorian.

Lavellan, dignity already stung, could only relent with a grumble. “Fine, but only for a few hours.”

Varric handed him the bottle. Lavellan took it grumpily, stared at the letter with even more petulance, and drank half the bottle. Vaguely sweet. Earthiness wisped like smoke around his tongue.

He settled into his cot with a scowl. His companions gave him self-satisfied smiles while Varric jokingly tucked him in.

“Want me to sing you a lullaby?” Bull asked.

“You’re supposed to put him to sleep, not make his ears bleed,” said Dorian.

“Hey, I’ve got a nice singing voice. All deep and smooth and stuff. It’s real nice. You’re hurting my feelings a little here, Dorian.”

“Only a little? Apologies. I’ll try harder.”

“All that effort for me? I’m touched.”

“Oh for—”

But their voices grew hazy and Lavellan's body was heavy, pulling, the Fade calling for his dreaming conscious. He would have fallen into that dreaming state but something soft was in the way. A net. And Lavellan succumbed to sleep at last.

When Lavellan next opened his eyes, it was dusk.

He groaned, entire body heavy, and sat up. His head felt as if a brick was weighing it down and a tight band was constricting it. Lavellan rubbed his eyes. The world was strange. Bleary. Like he was still half-asleep. When he stood, he felt as if he were floating.

Well. That didn’t sound good.

He parted the tent flap and shielded his eyes from the sun even if twilight had already softened it.

A few scouts loitering around the keep saluted as he passed and it took all his effort to nod in return and not look like an undead. He scoured the keep for familiar faces and finally found Varric speaking to one of the merchants trading their wares. Varric spotted Lavellan and waved the merchant off.

“Maker’s balls,” he said at Lavellan's approach. “You look like shit.”

Lavellan could only manage a grunt. It hadn't been a good rest, but it had been a rest, at least.

“I thought the elixir Chuckles made was supposed to help.”

He licked his dried mouth and forced his voice to work. “It did. Make me sleep. Didn’t say a good sleep. He did mention it was a temporary measure.” Mythal's mercy, his voice sounded like a

demon's croak. Varric must have thought so too judging by his grimace. "Besides, only slept for a few hours."

Varric chuckled nervously. "Uh, yeah. About that. That was a whole day ago."

Lavellan stared at him.

Then he sighed. "I think it's time to return to Skyhold."

Chapter End Notes

And that's on: sleep deprivation. The companions are this close to suplexing Lavellan into a bed. (Hawke also sucks at taking care of herself, please don't listen to her). Anyway, Inquisition forgot the teeny detail that Wardens can sense the taint.

Sorry about the HEFTY chapter. It was originally spread over two chapters but then I moved things around and so I had to smoosh the Crestwood stuff into one place.

And thank you for all the kind and lovely comments last chapter. Absolute champs, you lot I was very touched and taken aback by the response.

Psst, I made a Tumblr for this fic! --> [noverturemusings](#). Screenshots of my Lavellan is there if you'd like to see (feel free to ignore if you've already built up an image of him in your mind, I know how jarring it can be when it contradicts with the image you've constructed pft-) and also, a [drawing](#) by [ani3anani \(Wraithempath\)](#) which IS PRETTY DAMN COOL YALL. I AM FLIPPING MY SHIT. Might drop miscellaneous things like moodboards or deleted sections or something there in the future too. You can message me there or ask me stuff about the story if that floats thy boat.

Fluffy feathered fiends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

new hurts and old—

They stopped to rest the horses by the edge of a forest en route to Skyhold when a distressed caw caught Lavellan's attention. He glanced up from patting his horse, strained his ears for the sound, bid his chatting companions to hush.

"What's up, Mercy?" Bull asked.

Lavellan stayed quiet and waited. It wasn't long before he heard another cry and he catalogued the sound in his mind. Being around Leliana's messenger ravens long enough had familiarised him to that call. It had to be a red-crested raven.

"Wait here," he said and headed for the sound. He took his bow with him and readied an arrow, scanning the surroundings as he waded through the forest in case the call had attracted predators.

There!

He was right; it was a red-crested raven. The poor thing had a broken wing, thrashing in the underbrush in its distress. Lavellan put his weapon away. The raven glanced at his slow approach and snapped its beak.

"Hey there," he said softly. "I won't hurt you."

It flapped its wings, maybe in a bid to move back, but all that accomplished was kicking up soil and dry leaves. Had he taken a second longer, an opportunistic animal would have snapped up the raven. Lavellan reached for it, gentle, careful.

"Help," it mimicked. "Help."

These ravens had always been pretty intelligent. It wasn't unusual for one of the messenger ravens to repeat their handler's name or something like, "Dick," at innocent bystanders. Sometimes they'd echo whole phrases. "What's for food?" was popular.

The raven allowed him to approach and even touch it. Her. No underbelly crest. He fashioned a temporary wrap from the bandages he was carrying in his pouch and murmured reassurances as he wrapped her wing to her body.

He carefully lifted her close to him and returned to the others. Their gazes fell on the raven.

"Of course you'd rescue birds too," said Varric. "Yeah, that just fits."

"That one of Red's?" asked Bull.

"No. No canisters on the back. I need some supplies. She doesn't need a splint but I just need to secure the wrappings."

"She?"

“No underside crest.” He frowned at Dorian. “Think you can heal her? Fractured bone.”

He frowned and hummed in thought. “I can mend flesh, but bones are a little beyond me. Solas would be better suited for this. Or even Fiona. I believe she’s a spirit healer.”

Lavellan sighed. “Worth a shot.”

“Or you know,” said Sera, “let it heal. On its own. Without magic. Poor fluffer’s scared enough, look at her.”

The raven trembled in Lavellan’s arm. He stroked her and murmured more reassurances.

“Alright, let’s get back to Skyhold. We’ve got another hour left and I’m sure somebody there can have a look at her.”

Lavellan relinquished his horse to Dorian and rode in the carriage, grabbing one of the empty crates and stuffing it with soft materials for the raven before placing it under the sunlight for warmth. When they moved into the snowy areas of the Frostbacks, Lavellan grabbed more blankets.

“Hi,” said the raven at one point, snapping her beak at Lavellan. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said back.

“Hi.”

“What words do you know, clever girl?”

“Clever.”

Lavellan laughed and Sera taught her swears during the ride despite Lavellan’s disapproving noises. When they reached Skyhold, Lavellan relaxed. An involuntary response. Perhaps he’d missed Skyhold more than he cared to admit because his mind still associated it with *home*. In any case, the repairs had progressed at an impressive rate.

“They worked pretty fast,” said Bull with a low whistle.

“You can’t blame them,” said Blackwall. “This is a place of hope.”

“Alright, you guys go on ahead and get a drink or something,” said Lavellan. “I’ll take this bird to a healer. Maybe there’s one for animals.”

Dorian squinted at him. “And then it’s off to bed with you.”

“Dorian, it’s the afternoon.”

“And? I didn’t say sleep. Lie down before you collapse.”

Lavellan grumbled at him and walked off in search of an animal healer. They introduced him to Laina, who promised that the bird would recover in two weeks. He stayed while she cleaned the raven, but when Lavellan tried to leave, the raven kicked up a mighty fuss and flapped its wings after him, cawed and made a racket and only calmed once he swept her back up in his arms. Otherwise, her struggle may undo the wrapping and damage her wing further.

“My apologies, Inquisitor,” said Laina. “I fear the bird has grown attached to you. I could attempt to sedate her—”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’ll take her.” He smiled at her. “Could you teach me how to take care of her?”

“Of course. She isn’t under much shock, which is relieving. Your presence certainly helps. Here, I’ll write a few things down!”

And that was how he showed up to his War Council with a bird in his arm.

Leliana stared. “Is that one of mine?”

“No,” he said. “I found her injured in the forest. Could I borrow some of your feed later? And water.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Hi,” said the raven.

Josephine hid her adoring smile behind her board and cleared her throat. “Let us begin,” she said, professional and calm, but nobody was fooled. “Will you tell us what happened at Crestwood?”

He spoke of the mayor and arranged to find him, then updated them on the Wardens and Corypheus situation and organised the establishment of a forward camp at the Western Approach.

In turn, he learned of the progress of repairs in Skyhold and that his quarters were ready, and that the peace talks in Halamshiral would take place in four months.

Josephine’s eyes glimmered when she said, “Of course, that would involve training the Inquisitor in Orlesian politics and proper etiquette and navigating court and playing the Grand Game.”

After he’d navigated Tevinter’s court, he was confident he could handle Orlais.

What a wild ride that night had been. He’d caught wind of six murders just on the walk from the banquet table to the dance floor, interrupted another murder which involved a virgin pig and a cheese platter, stumbled across a blood magic ritual which required an orgy of no less than sixty people, and got himself either drugged or poisoned. He still wasn’t clear on that. All he had were hazy memories of fighting before waking with his prosthetic missing and someone’s severed pinkie in his pocket along with a note saying, “Never be this careless again,” written in Solas’ hand.

Lavellan didn’t want to talk about it.

They mistook his sour face to be directed at the prospect of training.

“Cheer up,” said Leliana. “It won’t be that bad.”

Lavellan didn’t correct them.

“Oh, we must teach him about the ballroom dances and— Oh goodness, we mustn’t forget that there are four subtypes for the Valse, and they are appropriate only for specific echelons of the nobility and we need to start thinking about the proper greetings for—”

“Breathe, Josephine,” Lavellan reminded. “And we don’t even have an invitation yet.”

Josephine cleared her throat once again and ignored Leliana and Cullen’s amused stares. “That may be so, Inquisitor, but we *must* attend the peace talks. It is where Orlais’ most powerful will be gathered.”

“They should really stop gathering powerful people all in one place,” he mused.

“We will begin the etiquette lessons.”

“Yay,” he drawled. “Who’s teaching me?”

“Leliana and me, of course. Oh, and Madame de Fer perhaps. We could also procure outside instructors.”

“Speaking of instructors,” said Leliana. “Inquisitor, I have looked into the matter of your training, combat-wise. I have narrowed it down to three trainers. Take your pick, either one or all, and I will send for them at once. The Arcanist also arrived four days ago. She’s in the Undercroft, if you wish to meet her.”

He nodded his thanks, looked over the trainers she'd picked and immediately chose Kihm, his old trainer. The man would break a flask over his head without blinking. Lavellan was a little pleased that things were coming back together again, but like all good things in his life, that didn't last long.

“One other matter,” said Leliana and took out a roll of paper, tied with a halla leather cord. Lavellan’s stomach dropped. “This arrived earlier this morning.”

She handed it to him and he opened it, making sure not to disturb the raven, already knew the distressed message it contained. No hidden letters from Ellana.

He'd been so panicked, so desperate last time, that once he'd found out that there was something strange regarding the Duke of Wycome, he'd ordered for his assassination. That had been a mistake. It had been due to his panic, his oversight, that they'd lost their lives.

Never again.

This time, he'd be careful.

He showed them the letter and waited for them to read.

“That is strange,” said Josephine. “The Duke shouldn’t have let raiders come this close. Let me contact him. He is an ally of the Inquisition.”

“No,” he said, more forceful than he'd intended. “Cullen, I want forces sent to the Marches immediately to protect my clan. Leliana, I want information on this Duke. Prod around.”

His response left them speechless.

“Are you sure?” Cullen eventually asked. “This may be a bit of an extreme reaction.”

“Commander, this is my family. Something is suspicious. Trust me, please.”

Cullen pressed his lips tight but nodded. “Alright, Inquisitor.”

They let him hold onto the letter and soon, he dismissed the War Council. Lavellan secured the raven and walked to the Undercroft to meet with Dagna, who cooed over his raven, then cooed over his hand. Some of his tension lifted due to her mad and infectious, excitable energy. He stayed longer than he'd expected. They talked about ingenious equipment and he brought up the grappling hook idea once more, as well as a way to work enchantments into their weapons and armour.

By the time they finished, it was already late in the night.

He considered retiring to his quarters but the thought of nightmares soured the idea, so he headed

straight for the old library below the Hall. Lavellan let the raven roost in a stack of old, crumpled papers while he worked in the candlelight and wrote condolence letters for the family of soldiers who had died at Haven. Cullen had given him the list during the Council and Lavellan had been torn between hysterical laughter and tears when he'd read it.

The list was significantly shorter.

Lavellan had changed things. He'd been given this chance, and he had to make good use of it.

So he wrote, poured his gratitude, his grief, and his hopes into the letters. He made sure they weren't just copied from each other, made sure they weren't generic, because those soldiers and their families deserved more than that.

It was far too easy to forget value of life when you presided decisions which would influence it.

Meanwhile, the raven hopped all over the table. Lavellan asked her to stop since he didn't want her aggravating her injuries and surprisingly, she listened.

"You're rather well-behaved for a raven, aren't you?" he asked. "I'm surprised you haven't tried to steal—" She nipped at his quill and hopped off with it, turned her head and dragged the nib over the crumpled papers and drew squiggles all over it. Lavellan chuckled. "Alright, miss, hand it over. I need to write these."

She dropped the quill and said, "Rest."

"You're perfectly free to doze off."

"Rest," she said again. "Inquisitor. Rest."

He paused, stared. Red-crested ravens were even smarter than the common ravens who were already plenty of trouble on their own, but did they usually pick things up this fast?

Lavellan stroked the underside of her beak. Her crooked, scary beak. These red-crests looked plain terrifying and intimidating.

"Not my name, feathers. That's a title. I'm Mahanon, of Clan Lavellan." Was he introducing himself to a bird?

"Lavellan," said she. Repeated it in glee.

He smiled and rolled his eyes as he picked up the quill and started on the letters. She hopped on his arm at one point and pecked his fingers.

"Rest. Lavellan rest."

"Not you too," he groaned.

In the end though, he fell asleep in the library. Woke up again, of course, dreaming of fire and blades and the death of his clan and their shattered screams— *Mahanon, why weren't you here?*

He grumbled. The raven was asleep in her nest of crumpled papers. He reached for his pack and took out his carving tools and another block of wood, this time a lighter wood than the first wolf, and set to work, listened to the sounds of Skyhold waking as his indication of the time, humming his mother's lullaby.

It almost sounded as if the Well was humming with him.

He met Kihm again and Lavellan's memory of him was accurate enough. Kihm jumped right in, threw Lavellan into the deep end, offered no explanation when he chucked Lavellan a bottle and said, "Now make the tempest."

It was the alchemical preservative. The one he'd later treat the leather and cloth of his armour with so he wouldn't burn or freeze or zap himself with the flasks. Although the preservative also catalysed the reaction with the flasks.

Anyway, he digressed.

That alone had taken him the whole day before, but now he breezed through it. He'd made it so many times before that he could do it in his sleep. Not that he was doing much of that.

"See, its unique properties all boils down to the emulsion between spindleweed extract and oil from either rashvine or dragonthorn," he gushed to an attentive Dagna as he prepared it, "and that acts as resistance, but introducing spirit essence makes them responsive to the cold, fire, or electric essences in the flasks and—"

The formula blew up when Kihm opened the bottle.

The raven squawked in shock on Lavellan's shoulder.

"Ha!" barked Kihm. "That was no tempest. That was a disaster! Do it again!"

Lavellan grumbled and pulled up the book to see if he really did screw it up. Then hit his head on the table. This was the old formula. He'd prepared according to the newer one.

So he redid it. Careful and attentive this time. But every single attempt ended in disaster because he kept making mistakes due to his fatigue and Kihm would send him back to redo it.

After his latest attempt failed yet again, he finally caved and asked Josephine for coffee to slap him awake. Only then did he *finally* manage to create a proper preservative.

Kihm approved of it but called it the end for the day's training.

With that finished, Lavellan roamed Skyhold, checked how the repairs were going, dropped in on Cassandra reading Swords and Shields and startled her, then quietly approached Varric to ask him to write for her. A gesture to smooth over the conflict between them.

Night had fallen by the time he finished his conversation with them. Lavellan headed back inside to get started on his paperwork, but halfway across the courtyard, he ran into Chancellor Roderick.

Lavellan stopped.

The two of them stared at each other in tense silence, the firelight from Roderick's torch flickering over their faces. His gaze fell on Lavellan's raven but he didn't ask.

Roderick broke the silence when he greeted, "Herald."

"Chancellor Roderick," Lavellan returned, unsure if his trembling hands were stemming from the coffee or the disconcertion from seeing a face that had died by this time in his past life. Roderick

had been sorry during his final moments, Dorian had said. "I'm not sure if I've done so already but I've been meaning to thank you. For lending your aid during Haven."

He nodded stiffly. Lavellan resisted fidgeting.

"Were you alright during the trek to Skyhold?" Lavellan asked to fill the silence.

"Yes, thank you," he said. "Congratulations on becoming Inquisitor."

"Thank you."

More awkward silence. Lavellan stared at a passing worker and their wagon of bricks as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Roderick sighed. "Inquisitor, I believe apologies are in order." Lavellan eyed him. This was so... surreal. "For my hostility towards you. The Conclave and— We were left unmoored and the declaration of you as the Herald left us all uncertain. It went against everything I've learned to revere." He shook his head and Lavellan's brows raised at the confession. "But the night after the attack... You've inspired faith in others with a purity I've never felt outside of the most sanctified of moments."

And Lavellan was back to being uncomfortable. Thankfully, Roderick didn't look at him as if he were the world's holiest saviour and Lavellan never realised how refreshing that was.

"Many questions remain," continued Roderick, "but sometimes, perhaps they don't need to be asked. I'm still as uncertain as I had been but I know now that the faithful are in good hands." Were they? In Lavellan's hands, really? "So, I am sorry, Inquisitor. If you will accept it."

Lavellan's gaze softened. "You were frightened, I understand. And I'm sorry too that I can't offer you any certainties. I can only promise to look after everyone as best as I can."

"Thank you," said Roderick.

"Will you be staying at Skyhold?"

He shook his head. "No. I will be returning to Val Royeaux by next week. Bureaucratic matters to attend to in the Grand Cathedral."

"I see. I hope you have a safe trip."

"Thank you." He cleared his throat. "I must be going. I still have a few tasks for Mother Marianne."

"I wouldn't wish to keep you. Have a good evening."

"Maker be with you, Inquisitor," he said and left Lavellan be. He smiled wryly at Roderick's retreating back. The god with him was not the Maker.

It was an ancient wolf.

That interaction left Lavellan shaken so he turned on his heel and swung by the tavern instead to spend time with Bull and the Chargers. He forewent the drinks and conversed with the others to take his mind off things. His raven had a blast hopping from people's shoulders to arms to heads.

"By the way, Mercy," said Bull, speech a tad slurred. "Solas was looking for you."

Lavellan kept his expression neutral. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Didn’t ask. You’ve been avoiding him.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve just been busy.”

“Uh huh.”

“I was! Let me tell you how many times that alchemical formula blew up in my face.”

He was *not* avoiding Solas.

He was avoiding Solas.

Lavellan stared at the door leading to the rotunda as if it had committed a personal offence against him and his predecessors. Well, it wasn’t like he was here for Solas. He was here so he could use the table in the rotunda for his paperwork. That was all. The old library was simply too dusty and he kept sneezing. Yes.

So he opened the door, walked on through.

There was a relieving lack of Solas, but the vivid paint adorning the wall stopped him in his tracks.

“This is your fortress,” Solas said, “and as such, I thought it fitting that it should bear witness to your actions. Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

And Lavellan almost tasted the regret in the air, sorrow with each brush stroke, guilt with each shape. This was Solas’ fortress, yet there Lavellan and the Inquisition were, imprinted upon the walls by Solas’ own hand. Why?

He'd heard that a demon of Regret had later dwelled in the plaster, the very pigments, roaring that it had risen from the regrets of a god.

Solas had completed one wall while Lavellan was away, this one detailing the Breach and the Conclave. Bold lines. Bold colours. Planned extensively beforehand and then utter confidence in the execution.

His fingers ghosted over the wall. It had dried already. Lavellan noted the supplies tucked away in a corner.

The next wall was still blank. Lavellan didn’t doubt it was already planned.

Solas still hadn’t arrived at that point so Lavellan sat at the table, dazed. Nobody was in the library above. Even further up were the occasional caws of the ravens and his raven glanced up, tilting her head.

“They’re our messengers,” he said.

Lavellan pulled out the quill and inkwell and began anew on his letters. Only a few remaining.

At some point, even the ravens above ceased their squawks, had gone to sleep. His raven had also fallen asleep on his lap. He was left in the quiet, the candles flickering with their light, sleep beyond reach. Not that he'd been seeking it in the first place. That was a futile avenue.

It was peaceful. Somewhat. He found himself humming again. Always the lullaby.

"Inquisitor."

He stopped humming.

"Solas," he greeted, not once looking up from his letters, gripping his quill as if it could be his lifeline.

The silence dragged for an awfully long time.

"Welcome back," said Solas.

"Thank you."

More silence. He could tell Solas was struggling.

"How was Crestwood?"

Lavellan raised a brow. Solas despised small talk and yet here he was.

His grip on the quill tightened because Solas' words were still fresh in Lavellan's mind, a hurt that had dug in deep.

"Damp," was his reply but didn't elaborate.

"Did you manage to sleep?"

"Don't start," grumbled Lavellan. His grip and forceful writing snapped the nib on the quill and he cursed. Why was Solas still hovering behind him? It was placing him on edge. "Why are you lurking at the back? Come out here and actually speak to me face-to-face." He stared down at the raven in his lap. "I'd do it but I'm indisposed."

He kept his gaze on the raven even as Solas appeared at the edge of his vision.

Solas made a soft noise. "So it was true. The Inquisitor has taken in a raven."

Lavellan mustered what courage he had left, pulling on the dregs of the coffee in his system though it had mostly worn off, and met Solas' gaze.

Solas frowned. "Inquisitor, I'll ask again: have you been sleeping?"

Ass wouldn't drop the title, huh?

"Does it look like I've been sleeping?"

"Yes, you are clearly wide-eyed and well-rested," he muttered. "Did the sleeping elixirs help?"

"It put me to sleep for an entire day," Lavellan said. "Then I woke up feeling no better than the dead. Who ratted me out?"

“Your body would have welcomed the rest, I suspect, even if you awoke in misery,” he said, ignoring the question, and Lavellan was too exhausted to keep interrogating. “You’ll be happy to know that the five people you had taken with you to Crestwood all accosted me at some point after your return telling me to make you sleep.”

Lavellan raised a brow. “What, even Sera?”

“Surprisingly, yes.”

Lavellan’s laugh was shaky, a tad too manic. “I bid you the best of luck, then.”

Solas considered him for a second too long but Lavellan refused to fidget. He walked closer and turned his head to read the letter Lavellan had penned.

“Hm,” Solas said.

“What?”

“Inquisitor, read the letter. Tell me what’s wrong.”

What was he up to? Lavellan lifted the paper and read it to himself.

“I regretfully wish to offer my sincerest regrets at the regretful loss of your son...” Lavellan stared. Then, softly, said, “Oh.”

“Yes.”

He revised the letters and all of them were of the same phenomenal quality. Which was to say, *trash*. His head fell in his hands. There went the last two hours of writing he’d done. Solas moved in his periphery.

Warm hands pried Lavellan’s away from his face.

“Come,” he said, voice soothing, lulling. “I will guide your dreams. Nightmares will not plague you this night.”

Lavellan made the mistake of looking up at Solas then, trapping himself in the intimacy of their sudden proximity. Solas must have had the same thought because he stilled.

Neither of them looked away.

Lavellan wasn't certain where the air in his lungs had gone. Perhaps it had been arrested by Solas' gaze.

Solas parted his lips, meant to speak, but no sound came and it would have been so easy to shatter the space and unseen barrier between them, to pull Solas close and—

“I can’t,” whispered Lavellan and it broke the moment between them. Couldn’t? Couldn’t what? He cleared his throat and Solas blinked as if clearing the fog in his head. “I can’t sleep,” Lavellan elaborated but he was sure that wasn’t the only reason. “There are so many things and I have to keep moving. I can’t. I can’t stay in the silence. I’m not fit to exist in stillness.”

Solas looked down at their joined hands. He let go. Lavellan’s fingers twitched at the sudden cold.

“Perhaps not, but rest is neither stillness nor silence. Rest is the water pulling back in preparation for a wave. You want to be at your best for those who depend on you?”

“Of course.”

“Then rest. For yourself.” He glanced at the letters. “And for them. Your raven has the right idea.”

“She’s not mine,” he mumbled. “I’ll set her free when she can fly again.”

Solas’ gaze softened and Lavellan’s throat shrivelled. Arguments with Solas, he could handle. Fights and ribs, he could handle. Rage, hatred, spite, sorrow, misery, Lavellan could do those when it came to Solas. But he’d forgotten kindness. Soft, tender, cherished moments. Comfort and warmth.

They were so alien and yet so sought after.

“Sleep?” Solas tried again.

Lavellan gave the letters another look, then sighed. He was right. His sleep deprivation was becoming harmful, and it would do the Inquisition no good to lose their Inquisitor because he’d snoozed while fighting a wraith. Now *that* would be mortifying. All the ridiculous events he’d lived through and then done in by a wraith.

“You’ll stop the nightmares?” he asked, cursed how childlike he sounded.

Solas smiled. “Yes.” He stood and Lavellan made sure he didn’t disturb the raven as he stood as well. “Let’s get you to your quarters.”

Lavellan shouldered his pack, one arm around the raven, but not before he paused in front of the fresco once more. Had it been the same in his past life? Or had Solas changed aspects of it?

What he would give to look upon it again with wonder untainted by heartache.

“Do you like it?” asked Solas.

“I love it,” he answered softly. *Is this how you say sorry?*

Because if so, it’s not enough.

“I’m glad.”

Lavellan turned before his ribs could split from his heart’s attempt to ravage its way out of his chest, and followed Solas.

The Hall was empty, chandelier candles snuffed. The moonlight through the stained-glass windows dusted the stones with soft colours. Nostalgia coated Lavellan as they moved to the Keep and ascended to where his quarters were, and when they finally entered, that nostalgia suffocated him.

There it was. Glass doors and balconies and fireplace and the little corner with his table and bookshelves, the upper walkway, the bed, the mural on the upper wall. The first time he’d seen it, he’d thought he’d walked into the wrong room. Such space, all dedicated for one person, had been a foreign concept to him.

Solas lit the fireplace with a wave of his hand. Lavellan raised a brow at the brazen display.

“I think we’re in the wrong room,” Lavellan joked to keep up appearances.

“These are your quarters.”

Lavellan found a small, upturned crate in the corner and pulled it out, placing it near the fireplace. But not too close. He found a pile of unused sheets and stuffed one into the crate to make it comfortable and placed the sleeping raven into it. She woke when he put her down, but he ran his finger over her head to placate her and she went back to sleep.

When he stood, Solas was looking at him, gaze tender in the firelight.

Lavellan looked away under the pretence of scanning the bedroom and opened the glass doors, getting a face full of Skyhold's nightly chill. He closed it quick with a breezy laugh.

"Solas, mountains."

He smiled. "Yes. Mountains."

"I can see even more up here than on the battlements." Lavellan poked his head out again, mesmerised by the moonlight caressing the mountain's trappings of snow. He'd missed this. "Solas, come look! See the stars? They're reflecting on the frozen river," he called before he could stop himself, always too eager to share the small beauties of the world with Solas. A habit he hadn't quite discarded. Lavellan would call out the beginnings of Solas' name whenever something fascinating had caught his attention, only for his voice to die and his delight to vanish once he recalled that nobody would answer.

But this time, there was an answer.

Solas stepped behind him, his warmth bleeding onto Lavellan's back as he pulled the door open wider.

They stood there in silence, breaths fogging as they dwelled in the night.

"It's beautiful," Lavellan said, hand clutching the door tight.

"Yes," said Solas, voice almost a whisper.

Lavellan traced a constellation in an attempt to remain casual, hoped Solas would assume Lavellan's fingers were trembling from the cold.

"Tenebrium," Lavellan named, "but the Dalish call it Tarlinydhara's." The shadowed owl. "Or as I like to call it, more evidence that Tevinter took ancient elven things and slapped a new name on it and called it theirs!" Solas snorted behind him. And because he couldn't resist, pointed at another and said, "Fenrir. The White Wolf. Possibly Fen'Harel."

"Or an old Neromenian tale," said Solas. "They say the white wolf escaped to the skies."

He resisted smiling. "Could be. But we're trying to work on my 'Tevinter thought Elvhen history was neat and was too uncreative to use their own' theory."

"It was likely more complicated than that."

"Oh definitely. But right now all I can think of is, 'Ooh, pretty!' or 'Oh look, stars' or dead silence that I'm filling in with chatter."

Solas wrangled him away from the door with a faint laugh and closed it. "Then let's get you to bed."

"Please, I beg you. I have been mothered extensively already at Crestwood and on the way back.

Don't you start too."

"Perhaps you should listen. When many voices are in united agreement, they are probably on to something."

"Many people think slavery is perfectly alright. Are they on to something?"

"The end of a sword perhaps," muttered Solas and a startled chortle escaped Lavellan. Solas made him sit on the bed. Lavellan tried to toe off his boots but kept slipping and Solas got fed up and pulled them off for him with a sigh.

Lavellan grumbled. "Are you going to take my clothes off for me too?"

"There are faster ways to freeze to death, Mahanon."

Warmth flickered in Lavellan's chest. Like a fire fighting against the hand smothering it.

"You said my name," he murmured, a touch triumphant.

Solas froze. "I am sorry. I overstepped—"

"No," he said. "You didn't." Lavellan unbuttoned his coat and folded it over his arms, tucking it under the adjacent pillow. He stood and took off his belt and its pouches, and draped it over the bed's footboard.

With his back to Solas, it was a little easier getting his thoughts in order. Somewhat. His exhaustion had scrambled his usual coherence.

And yet, Solas still said, "Inquisitor," and Lavellan's shoulders slumped. "I meant to apologise. For what I said last week before you left."

"Don't worry about it," Lavellan mumbled. Too tired. It was no use anyway because Solas would keep calling him by his title. Now that he thought about it, Solas had barely called him by his name last time too.

"No," said Solas. "What I said..."

Lavellan turned. "What else would you be?" he echoed dryly and Solas looked down, grimaced.

"You are more than Inquisitor or Herald," he said. "You are not defined by what others have proclaimed you to be. To me, you're..."

And Solas looked upon Lavellan with such a devastating sincerity that the space between them became too much yet not enough.

"To me, you change the world."

Lavellan's mouth dried, ribs splitting, splitting.

"Don't put me on a pedestal," he said, emotions thrown in tumult.

Solas shook his head, stepped closer, and yet the fissure opened wider between them.

"It is no pedestal, Inquisitor. Simply, I admire you. I respect you."

"Then why do you keep such distance?"

Solas smiled again. "I am not distant now." And true enough. The distance between them could be closed by a step, but they both knew that was not the distance Lavellan meant.

"Does it make you uncomfortable when I ask you to call me by name?" asked Lavellan. *Does it make me more real?* "I understand when we're in public. But now? It's only us two and you still call me Inquisitor."

"You are of higher rank than I."

No, he wasn't.

Lavellan stared at Solas. At this wolf in literal sheep's clothing. His tunic was made of lambswool and either Solas knew and was having a silent laugh about it, or it was serendipitous.

"Is that it?" asked Lavellan. "Rank?" He sighed and shook his head. "No, never mind. Perhaps I'm being too incessant. You're free to do as you like."

"Why does this matter so much to you?"

Lavellan looked away and finally got into bed, pulled the covers up to his chin as if it could shield him. "It doesn't matter now."

"Inquisitor—"

"So how do you plan to help the nightmares?" He stared resolutely at the flames, at the shadows they were casting from his raven's crate. It was silent for a lingering moment.

Then, "I had two methods in mind." Solas clasped his hands behind his back. "I can either pull you into my dreams or I can visit your dream and teach you how to mould nightmares into something more pleasant in the future."

So short-term versus long-term.

He didn't want Solas poking around in his nightmares. Who knew what kind of visions from the past it would give and then where would they be?

"I don't want anyone seeing my nightmares," said Lavellan.

Solas nodded once. "Of course. Try to fall asleep. I will follow shortly." He settled on the small couch tucked by the stairs without another word between them. Lavellan ignored the ache in his heart.

One step forward and two steps back with them.

He closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Wherein Lavellan makes a feathery friend.

[Missveils](#) suggested the song [Two Hungry Blackbirds](#) by Iron and Wine which has me feeling solavellan emotions. I'm emotionally devastated. Also the guitar is just *chef's

kiss*

After much deliberation, I replaced the iconic Haven-Fade scene with the next dream sequence because these two now have a changed dynamic and no way is Lavellan involving himself romantically with Solas at this point. Not as they are now. Too many issues they need to get sorted. Couldn't leave out the "I felt the whole world change" bit entirely though. Ouch.

Please ignore the muffled screaming from my room as I try to make sense of the Tempest spec.

Stasis and evolution

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

the intervals within pride—

Lavellan beheld a beautiful precipice. The sky shifted colours, an opalescent shell restraining and yet bleeding into the Beyond, and the long drop before him arrayed in broken fractals of smoke.

“Where have you taken me?” he asked the sky.

“I’ve not taken you anywhere yet,” said the sky. No, not the sky. Lavellan turned.

A white wolf greeted him, sitting on its haunches, its fur absorbing yet radiating the opalescent lights of the sky. Constellations danced within its eyes — stars reflected on an icy sea. If Lavellan strained his ears, he knew he’d hear the ancient hymns laced within its presence and sing it back.

“That seems risky,” he said to the wolf regarding its form. Though he couldn’t be sure why. Why would it be risky for a wolf to come to him as a wolf?

“Riskier if I were to approach you as man.”

“Which are you?”

The wolf canted its head. “Neither.”

And Lavellan accepted it. Nodded as if he understood, which he did.

“I’ve seen you before,” said Lavellan.

“I roam the Beyond.”

“Are we in the Beyond?”

The wolf bared its teeth. Almost a grin but too unnatural.

“Where else?”

Where else? An ancient fortress dwelling in the mountains, a place where creation and destruction coexisted to form an impermanent division, the symptom of hubris. Where stones wept with sorrow and joy in equal measure.

“Home,” said Lavellan.

“Do you have a home?”

“Do you?”

The wolf’s grin widened.

“I grow fonder of you by the minute,” admitted the wolf. “It would be wise for me to cease.”

“Are you wise?”

“Who is to say?”

Lavellan approached the wolf, watched it watch him, and sat cross-legged in front of it. He blinked up at it, marvelled at the swirling constellations in the eyes observing him, at the brilliance of its fur, the formidable fangs of its maw. He reached for it without thinking.

The wolf stood, snarled, snapped its teeth.

He paused, hands lingering between them, the wolf’s breath colder than the depths of a glacial storm.

Lavellan tried again, slower, gentler. He held the wolf’s gaze.

The wolf was large, its head easily the size of Lavellan's torso, but something in him knew that it could be bigger.

The back of Lavellan's hand brushed over its whiskers. The wolf flinched, but it didn’t growl or retreat. Lavellan rested his hands on its cheeks, then reached further and buried his fingers in its soft, iridescent fur. The wolf kept his gaze on Lavellan even as it lowered its head so he could reach more of it.

“You would dare to touch me?” the wolf asked.

Lavellan smiled. “You looked soft.”

“Soft?” it echoed. Its mouth did not move — rather, its voice resonated in Lavellan’s mind.

“And warm.”

The wolf stared at him, befuddled. “You are quite strange. Do you seek to pat every wolf you see?”

“Only the ones who look like they want to be sought.” The wolf was warm beneath his hand. Lavellan frowned, familiar with those eyes. “I know you,” he said.

“Do you?”

“Who are you?”

“Fenrir.”

“Try again.”

The wolf laughed. Lavellan thought it a nice laugh.

“You would not welcome me if you knew,” it said. “You should fear me.”

“Why?”

The wolf barked, lunged and pinned Lavellan to the ground with its large front paw over his chest, claws pressing into skin. It bared its teeth once more, blue eyes reddening. Its brilliant white fur grew shaggy and blackened, dripping into heavy smoke.

Lavellan stared back, unfazed.

“Do you fear me now?” it growled, voice reverbing from every direction, discordant. Black and

viscous liquid dribbled from its teeth onto Lavellan. “You are small. Insignificant. I am large and powerful. I can snap your spine beneath my jaw.”

There was a name whispering in Lavellan’s subconscious, urging him. He *knew* this wolf, could taste its name on his lips, on his tongue. He knew its name. What was it?

“No,” Lavellan said.

“If I devour your heart, will you fear me then?”

“I think I’d be too dead to be fearing much of anything.”

The wolf paused, then snarled anew. “Clever tongue. It will not always save you.”

“Ah, but is it endearing me to you?”

It barked again and the viscous liquid covered Lavellan, became wisps of darkness. A coat of shadows. When he breathed, he tasted the winds carrying death after a terrible winter. Lavellan reached for the wolf again and rested a gentle hand on its snout, trailed them up back towards its cheek. The darkness bled onto his fingers and crawled up his arms.

“Why do you insist?” asked the wolf, ceasing its snarling. “The darkness is reaching you so why do you hold on?”

Lavellan’s left hand flared with sunlight.

“If I hold you close, if you do not pull away, I can give us light.”

“If I pull away?”

“The darkness will swallow us both.”

It leaned the slightest into his touch. “It will swallow us anyway.”

“It’s not a certainty.”

Its name settled in Lavellan’s mind, a smooth stone dropping into a lake and sending naught but one ripple.

“You cannot change this,” said the wolf.

And Lavellan burned in his resolve, burned at being told of what he couldn’t do, burned and flared and blazed until the sunlight in his hand became the very sun itself.

The wolf started but Lavellan didn’t dare let go. He forced the wolf to look him in the eye and said:

“Watch me, Fen’Harel.”

And the sun consumed them both.

Lavellan pitched forward and somebody grabbed and pulled him back.

Steep, snow-covered slopes awaited below. He glanced up at the familiar mountains beyond, turned misty by the thin clouds. The sun's rays pierced through and scattered its golden threads of light like a fisherman's reel, gripping them in its warmth. It was dawn and the sun stood frozen in the sky.

He stepped back from the balcony's edge.

Balcony?

Lavellan turned once whoever had grabbed him let go and met Solas' solemn gaze.

"Solas," he greeted, looking around. "Where...?"

"Do you not recognise where we are?"

He looked back out over the familiar mountains, the balcony they were standing on, and crouched to examine the railings. They were thin, arborescent, more aesthetic than practical. Mosaic floors. He stood and turned, considered the building before him with its arched doorways and translucent curtains and smooth blocks of stone.

"Skyhold," he breathed.

This was not the Skyhold he knew. This was the Skyhold of years past, the ancient Skyhold which had housed the Dread Wolf.

Solas smiled.

Lavellan's breath left him. *This* was how it had been in the days of Elvhenan. Lavellan entered what had once been his quarters. Or what would become his quarters?

Gone was the fireplace, replaced by thin columns of crystal braided around each other as it stretched towards the ceiling and dispersed like the branches of a mighty tree, emanating a soft chromatic glow, emitting a warmth that no fireplace could ever provide. This room had more windows, allowed light to flood it.

There was a mural on the ceiling of a stylised eclipse and a chart of the stars around it. He gasped in delight when the sun's rays rotated and the moon pulsed with unearthly shadow, the stars revolving around them, the constellations occasionally lighting with their connecting lines.

The upper walkway housed shelves brimming with tomes and scrolls and ornaments. Ordered and tidy.

This room was golden and luminous and bright and still. So still that even the motes of dust drifting in the sunlight seemed frozen. The remnants of pure, raw magic shivered in the very air, so palpable that he could taste it when he licked his lips, could feel it with every breath as his lungs filled and his chest rose.

A large bed rested where his usually did. Elaborate carvings on its frame, threads of crystal embedded into it.

Lavellan let out a soft breath.

Solas watched him in silence, let him drink the sight in. Was this a test?

He noted the table in the same corner where his was. The only messy part of the room. He picked

up a paper from the table but the contents were illegible, swirling in its dreaming state.

“Why here?” Lavellan asked.

Solas observed the chromatic glow of the crystal tree and placed a hand upon it, gaze wistful.

“To see it as it once was,” said Solas.

Lavellan looked out the balcony once more, trying to make sense of the rest of Skyhold, but they were hazy, indistinct. He could just make out the spires.

“It’s beautiful,” said Lavellan and watched the shifting mural above him. “I wonder if that was done by hand.”

“It was. The ancient elves occasionally used magic, but they were mostly for ease of process. Their crafts are a direct result of their skill.”

“Whoever painted it is spectacular then.” Lavellan wagered it was Solas. “Just like your fresco in the rotunda.”

Solas looked away, smiling faintly as he did whenever Lavellan used to compliment his art. “You are too kind.”

“Never. I speak the truth. It must take a lot of skill and patience.” When he laid his eyes on the constellation of the White Wolf, he frowned again. What was that dream? Before this? He faced Solas, uncertain. “This is your dream, right?”

“Yes.”

Lavellan studied him, searched for any signs of uneasiness. “But I had a dream before this.”

“What of?” His face remained aloof.

Him! As Fen’Harel. “Did you not see it?”

“You must have fallen into your dreams before me. In the time it took for me to find you and pull you into my dream, the dream was entirely yours.” He stared at Lavellan, too intent, and Lavellan was doubly sure they’d shared the dream. “Was it a nightmare?”

Lavellan stared back, unwavering as he said, “No.”

“I see.” Solas turned and walked towards the bed, examining the carvings on the post. Lavellan suppressed his smile. Look at him trying to act casual after trying to spook Lavellan with his lupine form and disembodied voice and unnecessary snarling. Solas perched himself on the edge of the bed. The soft, comfortable-looking bed.

Lavellan sat on it, gasped, threw himself back and sank into its embrace.

“Oh this is nice,” he sighed. “Can you fall asleep in a dream?”

“You would wake.”

He grumbled.

For a while, they remained in the silence and Lavellan watched the constellations above, watched the sun’s rotation and the moon’s pulsing shadow.

Until Solas asked, “Do you wish you were here rather than the Skyhold of now?”

Lavellan hummed, said, “No.”

Solas turned to him with a frown. “No?”

“No.”

“You do not believe this to be better?”

“Why? Because it’s prettier?”

Solas sighed. “Besides the aesthetics, I meant that because this is... This is a remnant of what was lost. Do you not wish to restore it?”

“I don’t think one is better than the other. This is wonderful. Skyhold is wonderful too. The magnitude of their wonder is different though, I will admit. I can almost taste the magic in the air here, and these are only echoes.” He closed his eyes. “But Skyhold is important too. As it is now. A place of shelter, hope. For those in need of help, for those who are lost. It can’t be the world, but it can be a place of rest, hopefully.”

“I forget your idealism,” said Solas and Lavellan discerned the hint of moroseness in his tone.

He opened his eyes and sat up, turning on the bed to face Solas.

“Thank you for showing me this,” said Lavellan. “Don’t take this as me brushing it aside. This is...” The crystal tree was warm on his skin and within his heart. “This is more than I could have ever hoped for.”

Solas frowned. “It is only a bedroom.”

“No, this is history.” And Solas’ history too. This room must have been his. “It’s been changed so much. After seeing things such as this, I can understand why the present may feel stifling and dull for you.”

Solas regarded him, features relaxing. “Perhaps. But I will cede one point to you. There is a different wonder in the present.”

“Oh, you agree with me? The world must be ending.”

“I suspect, Inquisitor, that it is our disagreement which will cause the world to end.”

And Lavellan gave him a sad smile. “I shall seek to prove you wrong then.” He averted his gaze before the rending memories could resurface and instead focused on the painted constellations.

“Do you have any more stories?”

“Is there anything in particular you wish to hear?”

Lavellan lay back down so he wouldn’t have to look at him. The stars made a full revolution around the eclipse.

“I want a truth,” said Lavellan. “A painful truth.”

Solas gave him a peculiar look. “An interesting request. May I ask why?”

Because I tire of painful lies.

"I want to breathe."

"Have you always been this enigmatic?" asked Solas with a smile. Lavellan gave a feeble one back.

"No," he said. "So? What painful truth will you impart?"

He stayed quiet in thought, eyes trained on something hazy in the distance.

Then, "There once was a woman, who found herself in a foreign land," Solas began. His voice took on its lyrical quality once more and Lavellan found himself enraptured already, cursed himself for being so weak. "A land where the rules she had been accustomed to differed. Most would flee in fear of such an unknown, but instead, she saw endless potential."

The bedroom shifted, dropping like a curtain of smoke, and Lavellan sat up in alarm. Solas stilled him with a raise of his hand and a reassuring smile, gestured for him to watch. Lavellan spied the green backdrop of the Fade before the smoke rearranged and coalesced, gained colour, gained form — props on a stage. The bed they were on remained the only unchanged thing.

From the smoke rose an elfin shape, wispy and vague with indiscernible features, but Lavellan would recognise Mythal's crown from anywhere.

"We might attract demons," said Lavellan.

"No, not while I'm here."

A masculine form approached Mythal and held out his hand. Elgar'nar. She took his hand and they engaged in a dance.

"The one who called her to that land razed whatever he touched in his blind fury and short temper," Solas narrated.

Elgar'nar flared and Lavellan squinted, turned away from the searing light.

"But she would still him. Rein in his temperament and he would listen for he loved her and she him. They showed that it was possible to live in that foreign land, and many followed. Soon, they remade the land."

Humble towers erupted from the earth and clawed for the skies while fragments of stone ascended and settled within the clouds. Coils of light glimmered and threaded across those floating isles.

"And their love bore them what you might consider a family."

Four more elfin shapes materialised beside them. One held a sprig of herbs, another a bow, and the last two held matching staves. "But their prosperity could not last long. What small life they had built was overturned by the very ground they had built upon. The Earth raged."

The towers crumbled, the floating isles fell, and a wave of smoke washed over them, carried with it the faint sounds of screams.

"They led the fight against the Earth."

A crowd of elves raised their weapons and there was a faint chorus of rallying cries by Lavellan's ear. That family stepped forward, golden, while the rest of the elves remained grey smoke.

"They were victorious. They tamed and defeated the Earth, built upon its carcass in triumph."

Golden spires twisted upwards, and Lavellan grimaced at the visceral crack of bones and snap of tendons.

“But war and its aftermath are never pleasant,” said Solas. “Uncertainties and fear fester, and fear breeds a desire for simplicity. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Chains of command.” Lavellan clutched the sheets at the verbatim delivery, his Anchor flaring in response. He tucked it under his leg before it could catch Solas’ attention. “Leaders become respected elders. Then kings.”

Solas' expression darkened as crowns settled upon the Evanuris’ heads.

“And finally...”

The crowns flared into jagged halos and the People knelt.

“Gods.”

Lavellan noted that there were now seven Evanuris present when there had been six. June wasn’t part of the family, then. Ghilan’nain and Fen’Harel were absent since they’d ascended much later.

“But you yourself said power corrupts,” continued Solas. Chains swept in and constricted the spires. “Given time, the adulation gave rise to their vanity and greed.” A line of elves shuffled past, heads hung, chains connecting them. Bile rose in Lavellan's throat.

A painful truth he had asked for, and a painful truth Solas had given. Why this story? Was Solas testing him? If so, what was the test? And why?

“And soon, in-fighting tore them apart.” The Evanuris turned on one another save for Mythal, who raised her arms in placation, promoted peace, but it was not to be. “It was a slow-acting poison, a leeching corruption.” The golden spires blackened. “Until...”

The rest of the Evanuris turned on Mythal and the smoky figures overwhelmed her golden form, turned her red, then black, and Lavellan’s eyes widened as she shrieked. Solas hung his head.

A wolf howled.

The scene before Lavellan crumbled, became a hurricane of shadows and smoke and light. Lavellan shielded his eyes as the smoke and shadows whipped around them, phantom winds roaring in his ears, followed by a thunderous crack, a chorus of despairing screams—

Dissipated like mist beneath an afternoon sun.

Lavellan whipped his head up, breaths rapid. They were back in the bedroom.

He fixed Solas an incredulous stare. Why would he— Why would he tell Lavellan all this so early? Did he do something wrong? Something right? Did he tip Solas off?

“That was the Evanuris,” said Lavellan.

“Yes.”

“They turned on Mythal.”

His jaw clenched. “Yes.”

Lavellan scrutinised him, did his best to determine what was going through his mind, but he never could read Solas when it mattered.

“Why tell me this?” he asked.

“You wanted a painful truth.”

“I meant why this, specifically?” He was unsure what the appropriate reaction was. How had he reacted when he'd first become disillusioned about the Evanuris? Had it been a gradual process?

“You wished to breathe,” Solas said. “The first drawing of breath after submersion is always a gasp, a painful inhalation.”

Lavellan scowled. “Oh, and I suppose you think this is a gift you’ve imparted upon me?”

“No, lethallin,” he murmured, gaze both steely and sorrowful as he faced Lavellan. “Now you share my curse. Forgive me. I do not know why this is the story I chose to tell, but I suppose misery truly enjoys company.”

Lavellan stared down at his hands, the Anchor no longer flaring, his mind whirring, and yet, he wasn’t sure what his thoughts were. He sighed and closed his eyes. Solas watched him, heavy and anticipatory, awaiting Lavellan’s response. What was he looking for?

“How long have you known?” asked Lavellan, opening his eyes after he'd calmed his thoughts.

Solas stared out the window. “Long enough.”

“I can see now why the Dalish would have yelled at you,” said Lavellan with a wry smile and Solas’ expression soured. He wasn’t sure why Solas would show him this, why he would risk it, even if Lavellan had asked for it. “It must have been heavy, carrying that, knowing that, and not being believed.”

He frowned, casting Lavellan a suspicious look. “You... do not think I am lying?”

“No.”

“No?” It was nice being the one to throw Solas into emotional turmoil and confusion for once.

“I asked for a painful truth. Why would I get upset when you go ahead and do that?”

“I showed you something which challenges and upends what you have believed your whole life,” said Solas, bewildered.

“Big deal, the Fade crapped me out,” he grumbled.

“You are alarmingly unconcerned about this.”

Lavellan rubbed his face. “It’s not that I’m unconcerned.” He was, in fact, *very* concerned about this sudden turn of events. Just not for the reasons Solas thought. Count on him to turn things unpredictable and messy for Lavellan. “Do you *want* me to yell at you? Accuse you of feeding me lies, of desecrating the sanctity of our bright and glorious elven history?”

“It would not be out of place,” he muttered. And yet, that wasn’t what had happened and Solas looked like he wasn’t sure what to do about this bizarre circumstance too.

It clicked.

Solas *wanted* Lavellan to yell at him. He had dropped the uncomfortable truth upon Lavellan to anger him and push Solas away and Solas would then have his relieving confirmation that nobody

would ever listen.

So he could pull away.

“I’m not going to yell at or accuse you,” said Lavellan. “I trust you wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“No?” he asked. “Be very careful, Inquisitor. Betrayal can only come from those you trust.”

He smiled sadly at Solas, heart twisting into knots as he said, “I know.” Lavellan looked away and stared at the unassuming marble tiles of the bedroom, almost expected smoke to rise and play out Mythal’s murder over and over. “This... changes a few things,” mumbled Lavellan to himself. Solas’ lost yet curious look fell upon him.

“Yes,” he murmured, frowning. “It does.”

Meant completely different things, the both of them.

Solas relaxed. “I retract my previous statement. You do seem shaken.”

And Lavellan laughed without humour.

“Do you know what scares me most about that?” he asked. “I’m in a position of power. I don’t want to end up like that.” He hugged himself, looked up at Solas, almost pleading. “I don’t want to become greedy or vain or tyrannical or uncaring.”

Solas’ gaze saddened. “I suppose we will see what kind of hero and leader you become.” He turned his face away. “And whether history will remember you accurately.”

The morning was overcast when he awoke. Solas was already gone.

It hit Lavellan, for a terrifying, dizzying moment, that this room was indeed dull compared to the one of his dreams and something intrinsic within him *yearned*. Yearned for a lost state. A state he’d never had and was thus not his to lose. He stared at the ceiling and missed the shifting eclipse and rotating constellations.

Well, he was more awake now. The most rested he’d ever been in... a frightening length of time.

It must be late because the rest of Skyhold was already bustling. Lavellan observed them from his balcony, picking apart familiar figures, then got himself dressed for the day.

The raven squawked in her crate and Lavellan chuckled.

“I’m coming,” he said and picked her up. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

His stomach rumbled.

“Make that two.”

There was a plate of food already on the table. Still warm. A note rested beside it, written in Solas’ hand, and all it said was: *Eat*.

Lavellan's lips twitched and he ate, gave his raven a few grains.

Solas wasn't in the rotunda when Lavellan swung by. If he lingered there for longer than necessary, staring up at the mural and wondering what it could have been if allowed to move, nobody was around to call him out on it.

The day went as such: picked up his alchemically-treated armour and resumed training with Kihm, followed up with Leliana about Alexius' information about the leader of the Venatori, Calpernia, followed up with Cullen about the Red Templars and a fellow called Samson, paced and fretted about his clan, paced and fretted about the Inquisition, paced and fretted about Solas, paced and fretted about everything.

Lavellan threw himself into more work to keep his mind off it. He finished the letters of condolences and asked Josephine to check if he'd written them alright.

Still no signs of Solas.

By dusk, Lavellan had finished helping with repairs in the rear bailey. The builders and workers had ceased for the day and most had retreated to the tavern while Lavellan had retreated to a corner, sitting upon the pile of stones from one of the collapsed walls. He regarded the rear bailey. The builders had wanted to stay true to it as much as possible, either out of respect for the architecture, for the Elvhen, for their Inquisitor, or a combination of those.

As close as they could, anyway. They didn't exactly have the magic to sustain blocks of stone levitating in complex patterns.

The raven perched herself on his shoulders.

"I should really call you something else," he said to her. "Can't keep calling you the raven. Well, I can, but that's kind of sad."

She blinked at him, tilted her head, opened her beak and said, "Lavellan."

"I can't call you Lavellan, that's my clan name."

"Inquisitor."

"Sure, why not? You can be Inquisitor and I can rest in peace."

It squawked at him and pecked his neck.

"Ow," he grunted. "Is that how you're going to deliver judgement? Peck them?"

"Peck them?" she mimicked.

"I see it now. The mighty raven of terror, swooping to peck people in the eye."

"Peck them."

"What a useful skill. I've never wanted to be a bird more than I do now."

Lavellan stood and stretched, wrinkled his face. He stank. The communal baths were in the residential areas, but that was also under repairs. The archivists were still buzzing over the network of plumbing beneath them, which drew water from underground sources, but they did manage to get water running back through the castle. Solas had helped, apparently.

Of course he had. He knew how the place worked.

Lavellan could draw his own bath in his quarters in the meantime. On the way back, he swung by the rotunda a final time, tried to catch Solas there.

He was there, this time, working on his second fresco. Lavellan leaned against the doorway and watched as Solas took a step back and considered the patch he was working on.

Solas must have decided that that would be all for today because he packed up and only noticed Lavellan after he was already drying his hands from the wash basin.

“Inquisitor,” he greeted. Lavellan suppressed another annoyed expression at the address. Even in the dream, the bastard had refused to call him by name. “My apologies, I did not realise you were present.”

“That was rather the point,” said Lavellan and pushed off the wall. “Done for today?”

“I am.” He appraised Lavellan. “You still seem exhausted.”

“I’ve been busy. That’s what happens apparently when you’ve been put in charge of an entire organisation.”

Solas draped his towel over the rung of the basin stand. “If you require my help again tonight, I am happy to provide it.”

“Do you think...” He hesitated. “Do you think I can sleep dreamlessly tonight? Without waking up like an undead. Lucid dreaming is much better than nightmares for sure, but I’d like to stop thinking for a while. Dwarven-style sleeping.” He attempted a grin but it felt more like a grimace.

Solas frowned. “The Anchor ties you strongly to the Fade but I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you. For that and for last night. I think that was the first full night’s rest I’ve had in... a while.”

“You remain unfazed by what I have revealed last night?”

“I wouldn’t call it unfazed.” Lavellan shrugged his shoulder once the raven started slipping and helped her shuffle higher. She gave a short caw of gratitude. “But I’m not mad at you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Solas frowned as if Lavellan was the talking raven. “You are a puzzle, Inquisitor.”

“As are you.”

“Hardly,” said Solas. “I have been transparent so far. It is you who evades questions or gives vague answers.”

They stared at one another in mutual intrigue. Lavellan had thought himself ready for Solas and whatever he would throw Lavellan’s way, but he should learn by now that nothing ever went according to plan.

“Good luck trying to solve something that isn’t a puzzle in the first place,” said Lavellan. “I did that once. Very embarrassing. I was seven then, though, so it could still pass off as endearing.”

“I’m certain it was,” said Solas with a small smile and Lavellan couldn’t tell if that was sarcasm. He busied himself with cleaning the brushes and Lavellan watched his back.

“You wanted me to be angry, didn’t you?”

Solas stopped for a second, but no longer.

“Perhaps,” he agreed.

“Why?”

“It was safer that way,” he murmured, and the silence stretched between them after the response. Even the raven shifted in discomfort. Or maybe she just wanted to stop herself from slipping again.

“Who’s giving vague answers now?” Lavellan grumbled and shook his head. “Alright, I’m going to go and get myself washed.” He looked at the raven and hummed. “And this one needs to get her wrapping changed because she couldn’t leave the dirt well enough alone.”

She bit a lock of his hair and tugged.

“Watch it, bird, I’ll roast you.”

She cawed. He entertained that it sounded disapproving.

“Threatening birds now, are we?” asked Solas dryly.

“She pulled my hair.”

“Then she has done us all a favour.” He turned and stared, pressed his lips in thought. “Still, how fitting that you befriend a raven.”

“Why’s that?”

Solas’ gaze traced his face, specifically, the vallaslin, and he turned away with a bitter twist to his lips.

“You bear Dirthamen’s mark.”

Lavellan smiled. “Would you like to know why I picked it?”

Solas frowned at him, nodded tentatively, and Lavellan’s smile turned deprecating.

“Loyalty to family.”

A beat passed before a surprised huff of laughter escaped Solas, though it was not unkind.

“The world adores its terrible irony, it seems,” said Solas.

Lavellan regarded Solas, considered this entire situation, and agreed with a cruel laugh.

“That,” said Lavellan, “or it’s a sadist ass.”

“It could very well be both.”

Lavellan shook his head, laughter waning, and he should leave now before the humour could morph into something unfavourable and make him bawl on Solas once again. Creators, he was sick of crying. Everything would clog and he wouldn’t even feel satisfied after it.

“Do you need to be nearby to stop me from dreaming?” asked Lavellan.

“Momentarily,” he said.

He nodded. “I’ll leave the door unlocked then.” Lavellan fled before Solas could answer. By the time he’d finished bathing and changing the raven’s wrapping, exhaustion had caught up to him.

The raven slept in her crate while Lavellan pushed through and attempted to sort through some paperwork, but he inevitably fell asleep on his table.

Somebody woke him later and shepherded him to the bed but he was half-asleep and everything was hazy.

True to his word, Solas ensured Lavellan slept dreamlessly.

The weeks passed. Still no response from his clan, so he busied himself with Inquisition-related matters and training with Kihm before he could pull all his hair out from worry. His etiquette lessons also began. Not that he didn’t already know most of it, but he had to pretend anyway.

Solas continued helping with Lavellan’s nightmares but he never visited his quarters again, which was probably for the best. But they would still talk and travel in dreams instead, discussing anything and everything under the sun. No more life-changing truths dropped on him though, thank the gods.

Lavellan also finished carving the second wolf and was now working on the third, made of the same light-coloured wood.

The raven had healed in that time and Laina had given her the clear. She’d flown spectacularly. Lavellan had been somewhat hesitant to part with her, but halfway through the day after letting her go, the raven returned. He could tell it was her by how often she’d cawed, “Lavellan rest.”

So. He had a pet raven now.

She’d mind her own business most times, but she’d always come back. Sometimes she’d return with something shiny and he’d hear of someone losing an item, and he’d drag her back to return the item, embarrassed, apologising profusely to the owners.

If she wasn’t stealing, she was harrasing the horses or mimicking voices to fool the inhabitants of Skyhold.

Lavellan had to do an awful lot of apologising.

Varric thought it was the funniest fucking thing, second only to Cassandra’s reaction when he finally gave her the continuation to Swords and Shields.

And life went on in Skyhold. Holes in walls mended, more areas opened for residency, more of the faithful came for shelter or for a pilgrimage, the injured recovered and those who couldn’t passed away in relative peace thanks to a spirit of Compassion. Solas’ frescoes grew. Lavellan asked for asters for the garden and planted them with Blackwall.

Madame Vivienne had tutted at him at one point after meeting one too many dignitaries in his tunic, and had shoved him into a tasteful golden military uniform.

“You must stand out if you are to receive dignitaries and the faithful, darling. You are the Inquisitor.”

“Well, it does cut out a nice silhouette.”

“I know, dear. I know.”

They then went to the Fallow Mire for a few days to retrieve the soldiers the Avvar had held hostage and came back to their hold being battered by rams. He armed and exiled the Avvar chief to Tevinter with a small smile to himself.

It was after a consultation with Leliana regarding Calpernia that she addressed the raven on his shoulder.

“She seems restless,” she noted. “I’ve heard the most curious events around Skyhold.”

“If you heard of turnips going missing and being shoved into fire, that’s not her. It’s Cole.”

“There is a logic to Cole’s workings.” She smiled at the raven. “She, however, is an agent of mayhem.”

The raven opened her beak and said, “Veredhe.”

Lavellan stared at the raven, brows raised.

“What did she say?” asked Leliana.

“It was Elvish for mayhem. She knows Elvish? No, scratch that. She understood it in Common and translated it.”

“They *are* quite intelligent. Perhaps she’s picked it up from you or Solas.”

“Maybe,” he said, unconvinced. “Or learned it from outside. Maybe she travelled with a Dalish clan for a while.”

“It’s possible.” Leliana held out her arm and the raven tilted her head in curiosity, then cawed and shuffled closer to him. Leliana chuckled. “She’s attached to you. Good. You can use this.”

“Ever so pragmatic, spymaster.” He couldn’t help but smile though. It was always a good day when an animal enjoyed and preferred your company. “What were you thinking?”

“Something to benefit you both, hopefully. She could assist you during your battles.”

He frowned. “That may hurt her.”

“No, not directly. A watch, perhaps. Somebody to scout the terrain or warn you of impending danger. You can teach her certain signals or words. It would stimulate her mentally and allow her to fly as she wishes, while also serving as your eyes and ears. Does she listen to you?”

Lavellan stared at the raven in consideration, then held up a hand. She hopped on to it. “I scold her when she takes things and tell her to return them. Does that count?”

Leliana smiled. “I would count it. Could you tell her to fetch or deliver something?”

His gaze fell on the sweet rocks Leliana had on her table. He gestured to them and asked, “May I?”

She nodded and he took one.

“Hey, clever girl,” he said and she looked at him, blinked. He held up the candy and looked around, eyes locking onto Solas, who was sitting at the table. “Can you fly down and give this to Solas? Bald, light tunic, wolf jawbone necklace, can’t miss him.”

She cawed, took the candy in her beak, and flew down. He shared an amazed look with Leliana.

The raven landed on the table and dropped the candy, cawed once, and took off back to Lavellan. He held his arm out and she perched on it.

Solas looked up, wide-eyed, and Lavellan grinned, waved. He looked back at Leliana and her pleased expression.

“Well, Inquisitor,” she said, “I believe we can work with this.”

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan: I'm going to change things

Things: *changes*

Lavellan: -surprised pikachu face-

Anyway, Solas really out here trying to scare Lavellan away and can't figure out why it's not working. Meanwhile, Lavellan just laughs jadedly in "been there done that".

I see the raven has been met with either suspicion and/or endearment, to which I say, "Caw caw". (Ravens are absolute bastards of a bird sometimes and I love them for it).

On the shores of new choice

Chapter Notes

CW: Brief suicide attempt

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

lead the charge through voice—

“You should really name her,” said Blackwall after they finished planting more flowers for the garden. They rested on the bench beside the gazebo and Solas joined them after planting the last of the asters with a faint smile. His raven scrounged the dirt for worms.

“I’m terrible at naming,” he admitted. Lavellan had named his halla *Halhal* after all. Would have been cute if he hadn’t been sixteen when he’d named her.

“How do you garner her attention during training?” asked Solas.

“I whistle,” he said. The first three notes of his mother’s lullaby.

“Poor bird,” said Blackwall. “Such an elegant looking thing and you can’t even give her a name? She deserves the best.”

“We’re talking about the bird, right?” asked Lavellan.

“Who else?”

Lavellan grinned. “You tell me, lover boy.” He lowered his voice to mimic Blackwall’s deep pitch. “*You look exquisite in whatever you wear, my lady.*”

Blackwall gave him a long, hard look, face reddening. Then said, “You are a terrible man,” and stalked off. He even made a valiant attempt at trying to hide into his beard.

Lavellan threw his head back and laughed. “I’m an elf!” he called out and received a rude hand gesture in return. He noticed Solas smiling at him once his chuckles waned. Lavellan raised a brow, still grinning. “What?”

“You *are* terrible,” he said.

“Look, everyone here is stressed enough.” He leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his face. The cold wouldn’t kick in yet. “It helps to have a certain someone who brightens your day. Even if you just see them in the distance. Blackwall has a very puppy-dog look about him when he moons over Josephine. It’s a little adorable.”

“You *would* say that,” murmured Solas.

Lavellan opened his eyes and frowned at Solas. “What do you mean?”

“Simply that you have consistencies.”

“Consistencies?”

Solas smiled at him, his look indecipherable when he said, “Yes.” Without another word, he stood and dusted off his dirt-caked hands. “If you’ll excuse me, Inquisitor. I need a wash.”

“Oh.” Lavellan blinked. “Sure. See you around.”

Speaking of cleaning, Lavellan stood and freshened up in his quarters, then returned to the front bailey, his raven perching herself on his shoulders. A roar from the training grounds caught his attention and Lavellan looked in time to see Krem charge at Bull with his shield. They struggled, but Bull threw him down. They kept at it for a while before Lavellan approached in curiosity.

“What was that?” he overheard Bull asking Krem. “Come on, I’m working my ass off trying to teach you this.”

Krem held his shield up again. “You’ve still got plenty of ass left, Chief,” he snorted, then noticed Lavellan approaching. He straightened to attention. “Your Worship!” he greeted and smiled at the raven. “Troublemaker.”

“Mercy!” said Bull. “There you are. I was going to go look for you after this.”

Lavellan glanced at Krem, who looked ready to collapse on the grass.

“What’re you two up to?”

Bull grunted. “Trying to teach him how to defend against a shield bash. Also, I needed to hit something.”

“Ever heard of a training dummy, Chief? I heard they’re good for hitting.”

“A training dummy might actually stand its ground and wouldn’t fly off like a sack of onions.”

“Hey, onions are heavy.”

And Bull gave him a pitying look. “What am I even paying you for?”

“Technically, I’m doing the paying,” said Lavellan, smiling. “Mind sharing why you need to hit something?”

Bull’s expressions were usually controlled, precise, revealing everything yet nothing. A true and wonderful liar. But no matter how well-hidden, his unease still rolled off him in waves.

“I received a letter from my Ben-Hassrath contacts. Already verified it with Red, don’t worry.”

Lavellan's smile shifted into a scowl. Had this happened before? “I thought this was a one-way communication.”

“Makes two of us.” He adjusted the shield strap on his arm. “But you’re going to want to hear this out. The Qunari expressed their interest in allying with the Inquisition.”

He stared at Bull, wracked his memories, and concluded that *no*, this hadn't happened before. An alliance?

Lavellan looked down and muttered, “Well this is new.” First Solas’ behaviour and now this?

“I know right?”

Still, he had lingering suspicions regarding the Qunari. He may have formed an uneasy partnership with them while hunting Solas down, but it had hardly been an alliance and he'd hated every second of it. He suspected the feeling had been mutual.

"That sounds powerful," Lavellan said. "So you'll have to forgive me if I'm wary. That sounds too good to be true."

"I'd agree with you. Usually, that's how these things go, but they would never identify themselves like this. They *really* hate Corypheus and his Venatori. Red lyrium? Even worse. The Qunari have never made a full-blown alliance with a foreign power like this. This would be a big step."

Lavellan tasted the air within the Darvaarad. Bull had turned on them so quick, without a care, as if it had all been a party trick. *And out this hat, I will pull out a massive heaping of betrayal! You're welcome.*

Lavellan's gaze flicked to Krem in silent question.

Krem grinned in answer. "Apparently there's a shipping operation on the Storm Coast. Red lyrium. They want to hit it together. Even talked about bringing in their dreadnoughts."

Bull held his shield up again and Krem mirrored him.

"Always wanted to see those big warships in action," he mused before Bull slammed into him and sent him sprawling on his ass. Lavellan winced.

"Did you see *that*?" he asked Krem. "Go get some water."

Krem grumbled as he walked away. Bull turned back to Lavellan and his uneasiness didn't soothe Lavellan any.

"They're worried about tipping the smugglers so it's going to be a small force. You, me, my Chargers, and maybe some back-up. This is going to do a lot of good, Mercy. Think about it. An alliance would provide you with naval power, more Ben-Hassrath reports, Qunari soldiers pointed at the Venatori..." He sounded as if he was trying to convince himself too.

Lavellan tilted his head. "You're looking very apprehensive about this."

"Oh. No, it's just..." He chuckled softly. "I'm used to them being... over *there*. It's been a while. So? What do you say?"

Something curdled in his gut. This was new. Paranoia reared its head. What if he went to this alliance and then something awful happened and Bull chose the Qun over them again?

Maybe not. Maybe his worry was unfounded.

"Nothing personal, bas."

Or quite founded.

But if this *was* a success... He wasn't blind to the Qunari's military might. It may not be as great as it once was or as they claim, but it was still a significant force. This could make the fight against Corypheus much easier.

"Alright, Bull," he said. "This makes me a little uneasy but... alright. Let's hear them out."

Lavellan didn't think his choice of backup through.

The *Tevinter* mage and *Solas*? Really? He would like to question past Lavellan and politely demand, "What the fuck?" But he suspected the only answer he would get was a blank, exhausted look.

At least they were all in a sour mood. Besides the Chargers, who were eager to see the dreadnoughts.

"You seem troubled," said Solas as they moved through the Storm Coast to the meeting point. "For something that is of supposedly great import should it be successful." Lavellan wasn't deaf to the bitterness in his tone.

"I have little faith in the Qunari," he admitted.

"Because of your friend."

Lavellan blinked, surprised he remembered. "Yes. No. Not quite. I don't know. It seems unfair to judge a whole group based on one person's choice."

"The Qun offers no choices," said Solas. "Your friend was a direct result of the Qun's indoctrination. There is little room for individual thought and will within it."

He grimaced. "Don't let Bull hear you say that."

"The Iron Bull and I have argued about this at length before. I will not hesitate to do it again."

Lavellan snorted. Yes, argued at length. Quite atmospheric during their little trek to and through the Fallow Mire. Lavellan had almost pushed somebody into the water. That would have net *less* undead as compared to the amount they had attracted from the sheer volume of their argument. Not that Bull and Solas were the type to raise their voices, but the Mire had been so still and quiet that anything above a whisper may as well have been a crack of thunder.

They walked in silence for another few metres before Solas asked, "What do you think of the Qun, Inquisitor?"

"Controversial, given the company we're about to meet," he said. "There's a right time and place for my thoughts."

They arrived at the rendezvous point where a large tent had been set up with supplies and maps, but no Qunari contact in sight. Lavellan watched the skies. His raven was somewhere. He'd worry that she might fly off and never return but she'd had plenty of opportunities before. She wouldn't now.

"That's weird," said Bull, looking around. "The contact should be here."

"He is."

The contact who walked out was no Qunari. Rather, an elf. Lavellan had met plenty of elves who followed the Qun before, and every time, it had always caught him by surprise or it had made him uneasy, but he'd held his tongue. It wasn't his place to question other people's decisions when caught between a rock and a hard place. He understood the appeal of the Qun.

“Gatt!” Bull greeted and some of the disquiet which had plagued him for the entirety of the trip vanished. “Mer— Ah, *boss*—” an unpleasant crawl rippled over his skin— “this is Gatt. We worked together in Seheron.”

Gatt smiled and nodded at Lavellan, who did his best to hide his distress.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Inquisitor. Hissrad’s reports sang high praises of you and the work you’ve done.”

“Who?” Lavellan asked, wasn’t sure how to feel about Bull’s supposed high praises of him.

“Oh, that’d be, uh, me,” said Bull and Lavellan’s brows raised. He had a name besides the Iron Bull?

“I thought you didn’t have names under the Qun?”

“Ah, yeah, we don’t. It’s a title,” said Bull. “Because I was assigned to secret work. You can translate it as ‘Keeper of Illusions’ or—”

“Liar,” Gatt cut in with a short laugh. “It means liar.”

Bull scowled. “Well you don’t have to say it like *that*.”

Solas and Bull both had liar or a variant of it in their names, and Lavellan wasn’t sure what to do with that information besides curse them and the world. Instead, he said, “So, high praises, huh?” Because apparently, levity was his sole defence against collapsing into a mess.

“Aw, c’mon Mercy. Don’t make it awkward.”

“No, no, it’s so nice to know my friends say good things about me in their secret spy reports.”

Some of Gatt’s pleasant disposition faded. “They’re not really secret though, are they?”

Bull’s concern returned. “Gatt—”

“Don’t worry.” He waved a hand. “I know how it works here. We’re in this together and we all want to stop whatever is going on. Tevinter is terrible enough without this Venatori and their red lyrium.”

Dorian harrumphed behind them. “Ah yes, terrible Tevinter with the filthy, decadent brutes,” he said. “I’m certain life is sparkling under the Qun.”

“It was for me,” said Gatt. “The Qunari rescued me from slavery in Tevinter. I was eight.”

Lavellan sucked in a breath and bit his lip. Eight? *Eight*?

“The Qun isn’t perfect but it gave me a better life.”

Slavery at eight, and then taken in by the Qunari at such a young age. He’d just been a child.

“Yes,” said Dorian. “Free from all that pointless free will and independent thought. Such an improvement.”

“Eight,” Lavellan echoed, soft, but it caught their attention.

Gatt pressed his lips and looked away. “Yes,” he murmured. “Eight. I hadn’t known you kept

company with advocates for slavery, Inquisitor.”

“When the alternative option is the Qun?” spat Dorian.

“Dorian,” Lavellan said, laced enough reprimand and warning in it. Dorian still believed in slavery, believed it to be better, and Lavellan had forgotten how it nauseated him. “Enough.”

Dorian looked away, sufficiently vexed.

Lavellan had meant to say something more but then he was unsure what because vindictive rage swirled within him and he imagined the children in his clan, all of them in chains, broken, degraded, and the words wouldn’t come out. Because none would suffice. Solas looked at him intently. Lavellan clenched his fists by his side.

“Let’s focus,” he said instead.

“Are we to gloss over this then?” asked Gatt.

His nails would have cut into his palms had he no gloves on. He recalled Tevinter society when he’d visited, recalled the snippets he’d witnessed into the daily lives of slaves. How the nobles would jest that Lavellan would have made such a fine *servant* but ultimately *too much to handle, good gracious!* And they would laugh and he would chuckle along even as vitriolic anger and blood from his bitten cheek mixed in his mouth.

“Wait,” Lavellan called out to the elven woman. Her eyes were sunken, scars from lashes and burns peering from above the collar of her shirt. Hand-shaped bruises on her wrists. She was halfway out the window.

“No,” she whispered. “I can’t take it any longer.”

And Lavellan tasted ash with his next words.

“I can point you to somewhere safe.”

She laughed without humour. “Nowhere is safe.”

Cassandra and Harding were going to kill him.

“No, but someone.” Lavellan looked away. “Tonight, on the fifth harbour, there’s a ship full of escaped slaves. Go with them. They’re going to someone who can offer you shelter. Nobody can touch him. No Tevinter magister. No one. He will protect you.”

And hope dared to light in her eyes. “Who... is this? Why should I trust you?”

“He understands the confines of bondage. He has fought for slaves before.” The junction where prosthetic met the deadened flesh of his arm itched even if the nerves there had long been fried. Solas was seeking to end the world, yes, but in the midst, he was still offering shelter, and was it cruel of Lavellan to give this woman false hope? Perhaps he was no better than Solas after all. “As for trusting me... I would suggest against it except for this instance. Go. I can escort you to fifth harbour.”

She stared at him for a long time. “It’s the Wolf, isn’t it?” she asked. “The one the other elves have been talking about. I thought he was a myth.”

His prosthetic hand clenched. “Not a myth.” He offered his hand. “Please. Don’t let them break

you. You are stronger than them.”

She looked at his hand. Then, slowly, stepped away from the window, and took a few hesitant steps towards him. Her shaking hands rested over his. He gripped it, firm but gentle.

“Are you his friend?” she asked.

Lavellan turned and led her gently.

“Once.”

He led her to the fifth harbour and got her safely on the ship with the others and urged them to leave soon. Harding and her agents were coming to stop the voyage and shelter the escaped slaves themselves instead. An attempt to stop Solas’ forces from growing. Lavellan knew, even if he had agreed, that it wouldn’t work. They were no stable organisation. They couldn’t provide the safety and protection they required, especially against their masters. It would only put them in more danger.

Once Harding arrived with a small escort group, Lavellan stood on the harbour alone, facing off against the moonlight glimmering on the waters.

“Where are they?” she asked.

“Gone early,” he said.

“That’s strange.” She frowned. “And why are you here? I told you I could take care of it.”

He finally faced her with a false smile plastered on his face. “I guess I got worried.”

But Leliana had handpicked and trained Harding herself. Nothing escaped her.

“You let them go,” Harding deduced.

His smile faded into something softer but unremorseful.

“Why?” she asked.

“Who are we kidding? We can’t offer them the protection they need.” Lavellan traced the grooves in his prosthetic. “They’re safer with him.”

She blinked. “He’s kind of trying to end the world?”

“Believe me, Scout Harding, I haven’t forgotten. Not much to be done about it now.” He sighed.

“Come on. Let’s head back. I suspect I have two hours of yelling to sit through from Cass.”

“Three,” she said with a scowl. “One from me. We’ve discussed this, Inquisitor. You need to consult with us before you decide something.”

“I know, Lace. I’m sorry,” he murmured. She softened at her name and her exhale was resigned as she fell into step beside him. As they walked away, Lavellan cast a glance over his shoulders.

Later, in his dreams, when the Wolf stared him down, Lavellan asked, “Are they safe?”

“Yes.”

“Keep them that way. Do me this final favour.”

The sound of wooden blocks. It brought Lavellan back into the present and he blinked, everybody's gaze trained on him in question and he realised he'd been silent a while after Gatt's question. What was it? Right, glossing over the matter.

"No, we're not," he answered, surprised at the bitterness in it. Or perhaps not. "But an argument is the last thing we need. For whatever my words are worth, I'm sorry for what you went through."

Gatt considered him for a moment, then nodded. "Me too," he said and turned, went over the plan of attack even if the atmosphere felt strangled. They were to cover for the dreadnoughts and attack the Venatori camps scattered on the coast.

They split their main forces — the Chargers, and Lavellan's team. Lavellan would smile over Bull mother-henning the Chargers and Krem, but he had to agree. This whole thing had him tense.

While Bull discussed the strategy with the Chargers, Solas stood beside him and softly asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Yes," Lavellan answered, too quick. Solas shot him a doubtful look but Bull called them over and Lavellan fled that conversation.

After Lavellan's team dispatched the Venatori in their first targeted camp, he grew suspicious of Solas' quiet. Even as Bull and Gatt reminisced about their childhood under the Qun.

But Gatt had to poke at the hornet's nest.

"No tattoos like the Inquisitor," he noted, looking Solas over. "But you're carrying a staff. Are you from a Chantry Circle?"

Lavellan almost laughed at that. Solas in a Chantry Circle. Now there was a sight.

"No," said Solas, voice curt and cold. "I do not want to discuss it."

"Have I done something to offend you?"

"You joined the Qun."

Dorian snorted in barely concealed laughter and Bull rubbed his face.

"After they rescued me from slavery," argued Gatt.

"A slave may always struggle for freedom. But you among the Qun have been taught not to think."

"You hold the thought of freedom over *actual* freedom."

"When the cost is your individuality, it cannot be deemed as such. You did not break your chains. Merely swapped them for another."

"Solas," Bull interrupted. "Not now."

Lavellan hated every second of this goddamn mission.

They continued, the atmosphere thickening the longer the silence dragged. His raven circled over their group at one point and cawed twice. Lavellan squinted.

"We're close to the next camp," said Lavellan.

“Is that your little mayhem?” asked Bull. Lavellan smiled at that. His little mayhem?

“Yeah. Two caws, danger.”

They easily swept through the second camp, but the spellbinder headbutted Lavellan as a last resort. He waited for his eyes to stop watering as they trekked to the last camp, waving off Solas’ fussing, but he relented and allowed Solas to at least ease the pain.

They dealt with the last camp without further fuss.

“Clear, Gatt,” said Bull.

Gatt sent up the dreadnought signal and Lavellan breathed easier. Maybe this would end well, after all. Well enough.

“My boys already sent theirs up,” said Bull, brimming with pride. “See them down there?”

“Knew you gave them the easier job,” said Gatt.

The dreadnought rolled in, a battleship reflecting the formidability of the Qunari with its metal-plated hull and its angular protrusions from the bow. It fired at the poor, wooden smuggler’s ship and there went all that red lyrium. Bull laughed.

Lavellan had to admit, the dreadnoughts *were* a sight to behold. He would ask how the ship managed to stay afloat with all that metal but suspected he wouldn’t get an answer. The Qunari closely guarded their secrets.

And as with all good things in his life, it never lasted long.

Venatori closed in on the Chargers’ position and Lavellan lost count of their numbers. He took a quick stock of the Chargers, who prepared to fight, but several were injured or exhausted.

“Ah crap,” Bull muttered and whatever triumphant atmosphere they’d had shifted into a trepid, asphyxiating presence.

Lavellan turned to Gatt and said, “Your information was wrong.” He did all he could to keep the accusation out of it. Gatt’s face tensed as he watched them. Lavellan’s panic resurfaced and it took everything in him to keep his wits about him. He reached into his pocket and gripped the stone.

“Then we’ve been compromised,” said Gatt. “Only a few people knew about this operation. We have a spy in our midst.”

“Is that really our main concern right now?” Lavellan snapped. “They’ll be overrun. Not even we can hold off that many.”

Gatt ignored him and frowned at Bull. “Your men need to hold that position, Hissrad.”

“They do that,” said Bull, expression dark, “they’re dead.”

“If they don’t, the Venatori retake it and the dreadnought is dead. You’ll throw away an alliance with the Inquisition. You’d be declaring yourself Tal-Vashoth!”

Bull glowered at him.

Lavellan’s nerves frayed and he glanced back at the advancing throng of Venatori, Bull and Gatt’s argument dulling in his ears.

“They’re *my*. Men,” Bull reasserted.

Gatt’s face softened. “I know. But you need to do what’s right, Hissrad. For this alliance. For the Qun.”

And for the first time, Lavellan saw Bull look adrift. In the face of demons, dragons, whatever the world would throw at him, Bull would face them head-on despite his fears and come out roaring triumphantly.

Bull looked at Lavellan, imploring. Lavellan’s stomach sank. No, this wasn’t right. He couldn’t make Bull’s decision for him.

Lavellan looked out, time slowing in his alarm. He ran it through his head.

An alliance. With the Qunari. That was unprecedented, and it would certainly give them an edge in the fight against Corypheus. There were a good number of men manning that dreadnought who would lose their lives too, likely on par with the Chargers in number, maybe more. From a militaristic perspective, the choice was easy.

But the Inquisition was built from the people. From their faith, from their efforts. It stood because of the people within it, and it stood triumphant because of those people.

“Bull,” said Lavellan, throat thick, “I can’t decide for you. But know this.” He looked Bull in the eye and he wasn’t sure what for, but he pleaded too. Pleaded that this time, please, choose them over the Qun. It was so utterly selfish of Lavellan and unfair on Bull. But please, he couldn’t do it again. The Chargers’ death would be the death of the Iron Bull, and Lavellan could not watch his death a second time.

He pointed at the Chargers. Tears were warm at the back of his eyes and they shared a broken look.

“They are *yours*. You are their world.”

A dead-eyed Krem, Skinner engulfed in rage, Dalish doing her best to keep everyone together, Grim’s disappearance after Bull’s betrayal... The Iron Bull had been their world.

He had to swallow to keep going. “And they are yours, Bull. They’re yours.”

“Don’t!” said Gatt. “Please, Hissrad, don’t throw this all away.

I’m sorry to ask this much of you, but please choose us. Let me be selfish. Please, choose us.

And the Iron Bull’s conflicted expression melted.

He closed his eyes and, one could argue, finally made a choice that was entirely his.

He lifted the horn on his belt to his lips and sounded the retreat.

Lavellan choked on his gasp.

“No!” cried Gatt.

The Chargers retreated. Lavellan stared at their retreat, hands cold and trembling, frozen in disbelief because *holy shit, holy shit*—

Gatt paced, shaking his head.

“All these years, Hissrad, and you throw it all away! For what? For this?” He fixed Lavellan a venomous glare and spat, “For *them*?”

Lavellan flinched. To his surprise, it was Dorian who defended Bull.

“His name,” Dorian spat right back with even more venom, “is The Iron Bull.”

Bull stared at Dorian, wide-eyed. Even Dorian seemed surprised by his outburst. Gatt cast his gaze down, his anger melting, replaced by deadly calm.

“I suppose it is,” he said, shot them all a final, bitter and resigned look, and walked away without another word. They stayed on the edge of that cliff while the Venatori overtook the Chargers' previous post and struck the dreadnoughts with a volley of mage fire.

“The dreadnoughts can't get out of range,” said Bull, sullen. “Won't be long now.”

Lavellan forced himself to keep watching. Another game of weighing lives. The Chargers' lives in exchange for those manning the dreadnought, and he kept watching even as the dreadnought exploded in a shower of fire and smoke, the debris fluttering over turbulent waves like tainted snowfall. Stood even as the heat and wind from the explosion swept past them.

He had to watch. Bull was as still as him.

They both knew to look at the consequences of their actions without faltering. They had to. Their backs were an inspiration to those behind them.

“Bull...” Lavellan murmured but was unsure about what to say next.

Bull gave him a wan, exhausted smile. “Let's get back to my boys.”

The travel back to Skyhold was sombre and the Chargers' previous energy had been dulled by the fight. They all knew the terrible burden and cost of Bull's choice so they sat with Bull in silence on the way. Upon arrival at Skyhold, their quiet jarred everyone. The Chargers always returned merry. Loud.

Now the atmosphere hovering around them was funereal. They walked in vigil.

Lavellan bid Solas and Dorian to rest and Bull did the same with his Chargers. Once the two were left alone at the gates, Bull turned to Lavellan.

“Want a drink, Mercy?”

“Fuck.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Yes.”

“Something strong?”

“Yes.”

Instead of the tavern, Bull led him to the top of a watchtower, disappeared for a while, then returned with an unlabelled bottle and two tankards. He poured for Lavellan and contemplated his tankard before he shrugged and drank straight from the bottle. Lavellan took a swig. It was bitter,

burned, killed any feeling in his throat. It tasted like absolute piss.

“Nice, right?” asked Bull.

“Just what I needed.”

“Ha!”

They finished the bottle between the two of them, Bull drinking most of it because there was an awful lot of him for the alcohol to work through. Lavellan’s vision swam when he turned his head to look at Bull.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Rasped, more like.

Bull snorted, tipped his head back to drink, but there was none left. He grunted.

“Why? Nobody died. Why’re we all acting like somebody died. Well, none of ours, anyway...” Bull looked up at the sky.

“Maybe, but Hissrad died.”

“Hissrad’s already been dying.”

“You made a still difficult choice,” said Lavellan. “I’m sorry.”

“Fault’s not yours, Mercy. I blew that horn. I should be the one saying sorry. I tried to make you choose for me.”

“I still kind of sort of did a swaying. Little bit.”

He chuckled. “Hey, c’mon, don’t tell me it’s hitting already.”

Lavellan huffed. “You’re the size of a horse. I’m an elf. Small.”

The skies bruised in the twilight. Lavellan noticed the first of the stars appearing and drummed his fingers on the tankard.

“Was hoping you’d call the retreat,” admitted Lavellan.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Bull nudged Lavellan playfully with his elbows. Lavellan swayed and tried to right himself again, vision drifting. “And I meant it.”

“Huh?”

“The things I said about you and the work you’ve done in the reports I sent. You’re a good man, Mahanon. You try to be even when you have to make the tough calls.”

Warmth gathered behind his eyes. “Thanks,” he managed to say through the tangle in his throat.

“You’ve gone through some shit, haven’t you?”

“You too. Seheron was shit.”

“No kidding.”

They stayed longer in the silence, under the weight of their choices, the weight of the world and everything in between. Profound relief thrummed in his nerves, but guilt also warred for space.

Their interplay morphed each other into something unsightly. Guilt from the relief. Guilt at the relief.

“I knew a Qunari, once,” said Lavellan. “I thought we were good friends. We fought together. He had my back, I had his. He and a friend of mine got together. All nice. Happy even when things were going to shit.”

“Sensing a but.”

“The Qunari told him no more and ordered him to turn against us.”

Bull hung his head. “Ah,” he said softly. “Shit.”

Lavellan snorted in agreement, eyes blurring with unshed tears even as he blinked them away.

“We had to kill him. My friend and I. That or let him kill us and we couldn't let that happen. He just... did it.” Lavellan worked through the tightness of his throat. He snapped his fingers. “Like that. No hesitation, nothing. Snapped and we're flies to him. Things. *Bas*,” he spat. “Fucker. Couldn't even ask if he felt anything, *anything* at all.” Lavellan drew his knees up and let his head fall against it. “Couldn't ask if it meant anything.”

Bull leaned his head back against the merlons of the battlements. “He probably had to kill the meanings too.”

“You think?”

“He would have had to. Otherwise, he was fucked.”

“You think it was all an act?”

Bull played with the empty bottle. “Dunno. Maybe it wasn't an act, then it had to be. Or maybe the not caring was the act. Had to act like it meant nothing to make it easier for you guys to hate him, and if you hate him, makes it easier for him to kill you.”

Lavellan barked out a harsh, bitter laugh. “Then he still failed at that because I don't hate him.” *I let him back in. I let him have my back again. I'm sharing a drink with him again.*

Creators, he was so close to bawling on the spot. But he knew he would be able to hold it off, press it down, until he could curl up in the silence of his room and cry himself to sleep.

“When I was younger,” Bull began, “they already had me set up to be a fighter. I was big, I was tough. Obvious choice, right? But then, they found out I could also lie.”

The night passed with stories shared between them. Stories of Bull's childhood under the Qun, the people he knew.

It felt like Bull was saying goodbye to it.

He likely was.

Lavellan listened. It was the best he could do. Listened to stories about the Qunari, Hissrad. When their conversation ended, it was like a send-off at the conclusion of a funeral.

Just before they went their separate ways, Bull called out to him.

“Hey, Mercy? I just want you to know, whatever happens, whatever I regret, I'm where I want to

be.” He smiled. “And if you have to, if I do lose my mind and go savage, kill me.”

And Lavellan squeezed Bull’s arm, gave him a resolute stare. “We’ll help you not go savage first. I doubt you will anyway. You have more willpower than you think.”

Bull took a shaky breath. “Thanks.”

Lavellan patted his arm. “Get some rest. It’s been... a long day.”

He went straight to his quarters, closed the door behind him, managed to peel all his armour off and change into a comfortable attire. He crawled under his covers. Curled up.

Sobbed. Cried himself to sleep.

The next morning, he met Bull on the training grounds and found Gatt waiting as well. He donned on his Inquisitor mask. Gatt nodded at him stiffly when he arrived.

“Inquisitor,” he greeted. “I’ve been sent to inform you that there will be no alliance between our peoples. You will no longer receive Ben-Hassrath reports from your *Tal-Vashoth* ally.”

Bull crossed his arms. “Here to kill me, Gatt?”

“No. They’ve already lost one good man. They don’t want to lose two.” He bowed, a final gesture of respect, and walked away.

Bull watched him until he disappeared down the stairs. Then sighed.

“Well, that was fun,” he grumbled.

“The loss of the Ben-Hassrath reports will be felt,” said Lavellan and rubbed the back of his head. “We can smoke out some of your old contacts?”

Bull nodded. “They’ll pull their people soon enough, but we might be able to identify their replacements. Thinking ahead again, I see.”

“Might as well be useful while I’m here, right?”

Krem approached, holding himself awkwardly.

“You’re late,” said Bull.

He grinned and rolled his shoulders. “Sorry, chief, still sore from fighting all those Vints.” He nodded at Lavellan. “Good to see you, Inquisitor.”

“How are the Chargers?” he asked.

“No major injuries. All just tired. Thanks to you and chief, we had plenty of time to fall back.” They fell into formation, shields held up. “He’s even breaking open a bottle Chasind Sack Mead for us tonight. Heard about the drinking you guys did yesterday. Feeling a little left out.”

Bull rammed into Krem without warning. "Pay attention, you'll get yourself killed."

But Krem braced himself and held his ground, struggled against Bull for a few seconds, before he successfully shoved him back. Bull staggered. Lavellan grinned, and Bull shook his head, smiling in approval.

“Ah forget it,” he said. “You’re doing fine.”

Chapter End Notes

This one followed the script more because it never happened before for Lavellan. More peeks into the post-Trespasser future too. Lavellan and Dorian still need to have a Chat about slavery as well which is a conversation they will definitely have

I'm going to start slowing updates down to only every Thursday after next week. So two more updates for next week (Ch. 24 and 25) then it'll slow to once a week because the chapters are getting longer and editing them's starting to take longer on top of writing new content. I am a very impatient person however so I'll have to hold myself back from throwing out chapters too early otherwise I'm going to run out of buffer chapters.

Sacrifices of the forgotten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

death in the masks that we fought in—

Alexius' research papers arrived from Tevinter. Lavellan clutched them tight in his hand as he walked along the corridors of the Hall's lower floors, filled with a trepidation he couldn't shake off.

The last few times he'd met Alexius, he'd almost died or he'd made the man feel worse. But they needed to talk.

He stopped at the door that led to Alexius' office and entered.

There was a large table in the centre of the room boasting an assortment of apparatuses, and the child in Lavellan bounced at the sight, questions firing in his head, but he placed those aside. Not now.

Alexius was writing at his table, his guard beside him. Lavellan glanced at Alexius' shackles. He'd been cooperative, Solas had said, so the deal was that if Lavellan was satisfied with the research Alexius had done, he would ease his restrictions.

The guard saluted at Lavellan's arrival. Alexius looked at Lavellan with detached interest.

"Try not to touch anything, Inquisitor," said Alexius. "I have been warned about your propensity to meddle and fiddle with things you know nothing about."

The guard bristled. "You will speak to the Inquisitor with respect!" he demanded.

"It's alright, thank you," said Lavellan. "Could you leave us for a moment?"

He hesitated, but he saluted and left.

Once it was just the two of them, Alexius grunted. "What is this supposed to be? A smug display? Yes, the magister is bound and helpless and the Inquisitor could easily kill him where he stood."

"If I wanted you dead, I would have done it earlier," said Lavellan. "I'm not here to pick a fight, Alexius. I came here to talk."

"We are talking, are we not?"

"About your research."

"Ah." Alexius put his quill down and stood, faced Lavellan, the chains of his shackles ringing in the room. "I wouldn't believe you if it had not been for your friend. Solas."

"Have the two of you been able to work together alright?"

He sniffed. "He seems to have his wits about him, at the very least. He is knowledgeable. I feel as if all his knowledge is going to waste."

"Don't worry. I ask the right questions."

Alexius eyed him. "Do you?"

He smiled. "I do. And I've read over your research." He went to put the papers down on the large table but hesitated, glanced at Alexius in silent question. Alexius waved him off.

"Do as you like." He considered the liquid still inside some of the glassware. "But keep them away from the flasks and the fire."

Lavellan watched the spherical flask filled with boiling blue liquid that graduated to green as it passed through a tube and dripped into a flask. "What are you doing?"

"I detest small talk. Get on with it."

He huffed. "I'm serious. I'm curious."

Alexius eyed him, maybe trying to assess the validity of his claims, before he crossed the room and gestured at the first spherical flask. "I am testing whether I can refine the regenerative properties of a conventional healing elixir with a little magic. I am on my third extraction of the fifth trial."

And because Lavellan couldn't resist, he battered Alexius with questions. After concluding that no, Lavellan wasn't mocking him, Alexius gladly answered and his hostility faded, somewhat. They moved on to a discussion about Alexius' current projects and he spoke of his current focus, which was self-sustaining magic.

"You see here," Alexius said and unrolled a large canvas over the table. It was a schematic of a machine devised in Tevinter. "They wished to pull the coaches using magic alone but abandoned the idea since it cost more energy on the mages' part. It was more convenient to let the horses pull them. But I see it as a waste. They had the right idea but if I can just find a way to make the energy circulate on its own after an initial charging..."

"That *would* be a breakthrough," agreed Lavellan.

Alexius continued and Lavellan made inputs every now and again, lost track of the time.

The experiment with the healing elixir soon finished and Alexius hurried about, jotted things down, and grumbled whenever his shackles got in the way. After, he frowned at Lavellan once more.

"Alright, Inquisitor, you've feigned listening for long enough. I'm sure you didn't come here to listen to me natter on."

Lavellan shot him an exasperated look. "I wasn't faking my interest. I got side-tracked because I was that intrigued by the work you've been doing."

Alexius still looked unconvinced but some of his apprehension dissipated. "Why?"

"I'm not sure how you want me to answer that. It's interesting because it's interesting? Sorry to disappoint if you were expecting me to either bully you or run away screaming."

He harrumphed. "More's the pity." He looked out the window and crossed his arms. "Then what else did you wish to speak about?"

"A few things," said Lavellan. "Have you spoken to Dorian?"

"I have. He came down looking like a wet rag feeling sorry for itself, so I put him to work and

made him fetch me things.”

Lavellan smiled but dropped it when Alexius turned to face him again.

“I gather he enjoyed that,” said Lavellan.

“Wouldn’t stop complaining.”

“That does sound like him.”

Alexius smiled briefly at that and Lavellan took the small victory.

“And, I suppose, I wanted to check on you,” said Lavellan. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, you want to speak of *feelings* I see.”

“I’m serious, Alexius.”

“I know. Which makes it doubly worse. I wish to keep those to myself if you do not mind.”

Lavellan nodded. “Not at all. At least discuss them with somebody you trust. Dorian maybe.”

Alexius stayed quiet. Then, “We’ll see,” he said, which was as close to a yes as Lavellan was going to get.

“I also wanted to talk to you about your research. About time magic.”

“It has brought me nothing but death and ruination. I should never have touched it and I will have to decline if you want me to work on it again.”

“Not... quite.” Lavellan chewed on his lip. He’d deliberated on it for several nights already, had considered telling Alexius about what had happened to Lavellan, but he wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to trust Alexius with that. Alexius might get it into his head to just undo everything again if they stumbled across an answer. “I just want to know how it worked. You said it seemed to revolve around the Breach?”

“Why?”

“It’s dangerous,” he said. “Even more so when it’s not understood.”

Alexius gave him a steady look. “You lie, Inquisitor.”

“My reasons are my own.”

“So were the Elder One’s.”

Lavellan cracked a wry smile. “Believe me, I’m not interested in bringing back something of the past. I’m telling the truth. I want to understand it.”

“Yes, but you lie about why you wish to understand it. It’s why you’ve kept me alive isn’t it? I am the only one with a deeper understanding of time magic.”

“I can’t tell you why without revealing even more that I can’t answer.”

“Then be on your way, Inquisitor.”

Lavellan clenched his jaw. Was this a risk he was willing to take?

“If what I tell you gives you the breakthrough you would have needed, what will you do? Will you attempt to turn everything back?”

Alexius scoffed. “Is that what this is about? You worry I will attempt to turn time back?”

“Why not? It’s a tempting notion, isn’t it? Save your wife, stop Felix from contracting the Blight.”

“You overestimate the amount of fight I have left in me, Inquisitor.” He rerolled the schematics on the table, his chains clinking. Lavellan frowned at them. “I have said my goodbyes. I am not so cruel as to rip them from death.”

“That may be what you think now, but what if it’s in front of you?”

He chuckled. “You think demons haven’t already tried to tempt me with it? I am still here, am I not?”

“True enough. But I still can’t tell you.”

“Then I can’t help you. Simple as that.”

Lavellan chewed on his lip, truly considered telling Alexius then, but he shook his head.

“Walls have ears,” he said instead. “Good day then, Alexius. I wish you luck with your current endeavours. But before I go...” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. “Wrists out,” he said.

“You’re unshackling me?”

“Just the wrists. Maybe I’ll send you an assistant too. I’m afraid I can’t give you Solas though. He’s mine.”

He raised a brow at Lavellan’s choice of words.

“One of mine,” he elaborated as he worked on the shackles. The shackles were simple, just like any normal shackles, but enchanted specifically for mages. Once locked, the entire thing became magic-resistant. “The conditions for this is that you get a Templar guard instead of a regular one.”

“Fine by me.” He rubbed his wrists when the shackles came off and Lavellan readied himself for any sudden attacks, but Alexius made no move, simply nodded at him. “Thank you, Inquisitor. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have a report I need to write to Fiona.” He sat at his table again and that was that. Lavellan turned to leave, then stopped at the door.

“Alexius?” he called out.

He grunted. “What now?”

Lavellan smiled. “Can I visit again?”

“Do as you like. You’re the Inquisitor, aren’t you?”

“I’ll bring a fruit basket next time.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Pomegranates,” he decided. “Going once, going twice?”

"I hope you choke on them."

"Good man." He grinned and left the room, informed the guard of the new development, and left.

It seemed Alexius was out of the question, however, his research did sound interesting and promising and Lavellan genuinely wished him the best. Dorian was right. Research did make Alexius happy.

Speaking of Dorian, Lavellan asked for his whereabouts and the others pointed him to the garden.

Skyhold's garden was coming along nicely. The frigid air had thawed from the mild warmth coming from the stubborn needles of sunlight piercing through the grey clouds, and the burst of colour from the asters and winterbells brought a little cheer into the place. Lavellan eyed one of the corners, already planning the herb garden in his head. He'd used pots before. Maybe this time, he would try a bed and separate them with small stones.

Dorian was in the gazebo with Solas, engaged in a game of chess. Solas was leaning back with a self-satisfied smile while Dorian was bent over the board, grumbling in thought. They both looked up at Lavellan's arrival.

"Inquisitor," Solas greeted. "It is a lovely day today."

"It's overcast, you loon," said Dorian.

"Can I not appreciate the clouds for their resplendence?"

Dorian shot Lavellan a pleading glance. "Look at him, he's absolutely beside himself."

Lavellan studied the board and laughed. "I think he has every right to be. How did you get this cornered?"

"He was being *sneaky*," he hissed, faking his affront. "The nerve of him."

Solas steepled his fingers. "I am not the one who cheated."

"Ah. Death to cheaters," agreed Lavellan.

"I thought we were friends. Death to traitors," returned Dorian.

"You wound me."

Lavellan watched their match even if it was already inevitable Solas would win. It, of course, came as no surprise when Solas moved his final, winning piece.

"I believe the game is mine," Solas said.

Dorian shook his head. "Terrible." He was smiling though. "So, dear Inquisitor, what brings you to the garden?"

"Looking for you actually," he said. "I just spoke to Alexius."

Dorian sobered. "Oh? How is he? I haven't spoken to him since last week."

"He's alright. Better than when I last saw him, at least. Grumpy." Lavellan laughed faintly. "I did spend more time there than I thought I would. He has a few interesting projects lined up. Did you know he's looking into self-sustaining magic?"

“He told me of it,” said Dorian. “You truly listened to him blabber on?”

Lavellan blinked. “Yes?”

“Impressive. Even I fall asleep. He is so enthusiastic and yet so boring when he relays them.” He laughed. “It earned me a few slaps behind the head during my apprenticeship.”

“Maybe I’m just easily impressed? I don’t know, I thought it was fascinating. I also eased his restrictions. No more wrist shackles but he’ll now have a Templar stationed to him. I was also thinking of giving him an assistant, what do you think?”

Dorian looked at Solas. “Aren’t they already working together?”

“Solas is—” he stopped himself before he could say something idiotic like *mine* again— “working with us most of the time. And I mean, an actual, dedicated assistant. He could use some help around the lab.”

Solas hummed. “Perhaps a young apprentice among the mages. Some of them could certainly benefit from working under him and I suspect the company would do him good.”

Lavellan nodded. “Not a bad idea.”

“Well, I better go see him then,” said Dorian as he stood and stretched. “While he’s still sufficiently annoyed from your visit.”

“Running away, Pavus?” Solas asked.

“Strategically retreating.”

“Of course. My mistake. Be on your way then.”

Dorian gave Lavellan a look as if to say, *Do you see what I have to put up with?* And Lavellan answered with a look in kind that said, *Yes. Believe me, I do.*

“Care for a round, Inquisitor?” Solas asked.

Lavellan considered him and the board with a hum for a moment, then asked, “Black or white?”

Solas smiled. “White.”

He sat on the seat that Dorian had vacated and helped Solas prepare the board. Lavellan leaned on his thighs with a sharp smile.

“You’ve been wanting this game for a while, haven’t you?” he asked.

“I have, yes. You learn a great many things about a person by the way they play chess.” He moved his knight.

Lavellan raised a brow at him. Solas was basically letting Lavellan choose the direction of the game.

“You’re that confident, are you?” he asked and moved his knight to mirror Solas.

Solas merely smiled, made his next move. “What did you and Alexius talk about?”

“Like I said, his projects.”

Solas peered at him. “No discussion of time magic?”

“Alexius doesn’t want to touch it again. I’m not forcing him to do it. I’ll have to make do with his research.”

“That is probably for the best.”

They spoke of several things as they played, such as Lavellan’s idea for the herb garden, Solas’ recent mishaps due to Sera’s pranks, Lavellan’s gripes about the etiquette lessons, and all manner of things.

Soon, Solas’ easy smile slipped and he leaned forward in thought. Lavellan would grin at him in taunting but he was no better. He’d never actually played against Solas before, not even in his past life, so while it was in character, Solas’ methods still came as a surprise. He was reckless, aggressive, sacrificing vital pieces. At points, Lavellan was sure he’d thrown the game or was letting Lavellan win.

That was his mistake.

Soon, Lavellan stared down at the board with an annoyed grumble. Dead positions. How terribly fitting that neither of them had won. Sacrificed too much. Now look where they were.

Solas laughed softly. “A draw.”

Lavellan recalled the blades piercing both their hearts and resisted holding a hand up to where the blade had entered flesh.

But life was not chess.

It hadn’t been a draw; it had been twice the loss.

“Well played,” Lavellan complimented, mouth dry.

“Likewise.” He gestured at the board. “Unless you’d care for another round?”

Lavellan considered it, then shrugged and gave what he hoped could pass as a casual smile. “Are you that eager for me to kick your ass?”

“Careful, Inquisitor. Your fragile body may not be able to carry the weight of such a large head.”

Solas prepared the board once more but Lavellan’s raven cawed and swooped into the gazebo, a roll of paper clutched in her claws. Lavellan caught the letter when she dropped it. She perched on his shoulders and cawed, “Clever girl.”

He snorted and stroked the underside of her beak. “Yes, yes, you’re a clever girl. What have you brought me?”

“Iron Bull,” she said, puffed her feathers in pride.

Lavellan opened the paper, which simply read: *Meet me on the battlements*. How ominous. Still, he’d used Lavellan’s raven instead of just getting somebody to come fetch him.

“I’m sorry Solas,” he said and stood. “I’ll have to kick your ass another time.”

“Prepare to be disappointed,” he calmly returned. “Is everything alright?”

Lavellan pocketed the letter and pursed his lips. “Hopefully. I’ll see you later.”

He ascended the garden stairs that led to the battlements and found Bull near Skyhold’s gatehouse. Bull turned to him with a smile. Nothing seemed amiss.

“Hey Mercy,” he greeted.

“Hey Bull. You wanted to talk to me?”

Two Inquisition soldiers exited the opposite watchtower and headed their way.

No salutes.

Lavellan was already reaching for his daggers when one of them drew a blade and rushed forward.

“I got it!” said Bull. He whirled and socked the assassin in the jaw. The other threw a knife. It lodged in Bull’s shoulders but he yanked it out and hurled it right back at the assassin’s throat. They fell with a gurgle.

The remaining assassin staggered up, spat, “Ebast issala, Tal-Vashoth!”

Bull grabbed and threw him over the battlements. He dusted his hands off as he listened to the assassin’s screams fade.

“Yeah, yeah, my soul’s dust. Yours is scattered all over the ground though, so...” He hissed as he rolled his shoulders and finally faced Lavellan, whose hands were still hovering over his daggers. Even his raven was stuck in a position ready to take flight. “Sorry, Mercy. Thought I might need backup. Guess I’m not even worth sending professionals for.”

Lavellan looked back over the battlements, brows raised. “You knew the assassins were coming?”

“Guard rotation changed,” he explained.

He scowled. “Wonderful. Only a month in Skyhold and we’re already compromised.” Lavellan *really* didn't want a repeat of the Exalted Council incident with Fen’Harel and Qunari agents tripping over each other’s dicks.

“It’s a rite of passage at this point. Congratulations, Mercy, your organisation's important!”

Lavellan snorted, dug through his pockets to give Bull a cloth.

“That looks poisoned,” Lavellan said.

“It is.” Bull accepted the cloth, mopped up the blood with a wince. “Good thing I’ve been dosing myself with the antidote. Just stings like shit right now, but that’s it. Lucky for you. No dealing with a rampaging Qunari hurling his guts out his mouth.”

Lavellan cringed at the image. “I hoped the Ben-Hassrath would have let you go.”

“They did,” he said, tone dipping into something vulnerable. “This was more of a formality. Making it clear that I’m...” He looked down and sighed. “Tal-Va-fucking-shoth.”

This was new. Lavellan had changed things but... was it a good change? Bull had lost the way of life he'd known his whole life and now, he just looked miserable. Maybe he wasn't the one who'd made the choice for Bull, but he did manipulate Bull. Somewhat. Then again, Bull could have easily ignored Lavellan’s appeals.

Bull could have decided that the Chargers' deaths were worth the sacrifice.

"Bull, that doesn't change who you are," said Lavellan. "That's a title given to you by a system you no longer follow. I know you're a good man, and you're someone who cares about his friends. If that's Tal-Vashoth for them, so be it."

So why did he turn on you? Were you ever really friends then?

Lavellan acknowledged the thoughts but gave them no purchase to cling to. That was done. No matter how it hurt, that was done.

Someday, maybe the pain would dull enough for him to completely ignore it.

Bull shook his head. "Without the Qun to live by... The Tal-Vashoth I fought in Seheron were savages, bastards who turned their backs on the Qun." His face pulled tight. "And now I'm one of them."

"Bull, Seheron was a shitshow. I'm pretty sure they were like that because of the environment. Tal-Vashoth is nothing but another set of words assigned to those who no longer follow the Qun. Tal-Vashoth doesn't mean savage or murderer or freak. And that's a Qunari word, which you aren't any longer, so technically, you're not Vashoth either. You're the Iron Bull, Captain of the Bull's Chargers." Lavellan pulled a face. "And the Inquisitor's *really* expensive bodyguard."

Bull snorted. "Hey, I'm a bargain. And so worth it."

Lavellan's joking expression softened.

"Yeah," he agreed, "and a friend."

"Aw, Mercy."

Lavellan gently grabbed his arm and tugged on it. "Come on, let's get that seen to. We'll tell Cullen and Leliana about this too. I don't like the thought of too many spies crawling all over us like ants."

Bull laughed faintly and walked beside Lavellan.

It was a while of silence before Lavellan spoke up again and said, "Thank you."

He frowned at Lavellan. "For what?"

"For choosing us. I'm sorry it had to be like this." Lavellan looked up at Bull. "We're here for you. Whatever you need."

Bull slung his arm around Lavellan's shoulders, but their height difference just made Lavellan look like an arm rest.

"Thanks, Mercy."

After they got Bull's injury seen to and reported the incident to Cullen and Leliana, Lavellan and Bull headed back to the tavern for another round of drinks with the Chargers. Lavellan had no plans to drink, but he still wanted to be within their company. To convince himself that this was all real.

On the walk, Lavellan asked, "Hypothetically, if the Qunari asked you to betray the Inquisition, what would you do?"

Bull slanted him a glance, probably already knew why Lavellan was asking.

“I’d politely tell them to choke on my cock,” he said.

Lavellan laughed. “Politely?”

“Politely.”

Tentative hope blossomed in Lavellan’s heart. If the Qunari hadn’t extended the offer of alliance towards the Inquisition, then Bull would have stayed loyal to the Qun. Lavellan had thought his betrayal inevitable, but wasn’t that a terrible mindset? If he wanted things to change, he should seek to change them, try different avenues, look into things he hadn’t considered. If he could change and control certain events, why couldn’t he extend that to the fate of his friends and his soldiers?

Maybe he needn’t brace for Solas’ plans.

Perhaps Lavellan could try. He wasn’t sure what he could try yet but he should start looking.

Or perhaps...

Perhaps he was playing god too. Like Solas. Like Corypheus.

Maybe he would drink after all.

During the War Council, Cullen and Leliana handed him the reports on the Wycome situation.

Lavellan frowned at the two letters in his hand, dissected the information presented to him with the critical eye he’d honed and sharpened over the years through political navigation and deception.

On one hand was a letter from Jester, one of Leliana’s agents. There was a plague in Wycome which was apparently only affecting humans, and so, the nobles had blamed it on the elves. The duke had chosen Clan Lavellan as his scapegoat. How fortunate for him that one of Josephine’s ambassadors, Lady Guinevere, had discovered that the duke had been using *red crystals* in the well to purify the water and that he hadn’t *improved* the alienage’s well just yet. Lavellan hadn’t been aware of *that* in his past life. He’d been too hasty then, had ordered the assassination.

Terrible choice. He had to wait, had to be careful and treat this with caution.

“It’s red lyrium, isn’t it?” he grumbled.

“It would seem that way,” said Cullen.

The letter from the ambassador further informed them that the duke had a Tevinter advisor who wished to meet with her. Her letter’s subtle phrasing was not lost on them.

“I fear for Lady Guinevere’s safety,” said Josephine, “but she is a brilliant negotiator. I have faith that she can find a peaceful solution.”

Leliana shook her head. “No. This is no longer a matter of diplomacy, Josie. We must eliminate the Tevinter advisor if the Lady suspects him a Venatori.”

He'd been hasty with the duke before, but...

"Becoming increasingly *difficult* to *resist* such a tempting offer," he read out loud. "The emphasis would be easily dismissible as her being an enthusiastic writer." Lavellan looked at his advisors over the paper. "If we were idiots. Which I sure hope we aren't. This Tevinter advisor is too eager. I'm *sure* she's a charming woman and this advisor must be of equal charm if she's having trouble resisting his offer."

Cullen hummed in agreement. "The Venatori are supremacists. The chances of them listening to offers of peace from an Inquisition representative is low."

"I *did* almost bury their leader under snow," said Lavellan. "I don't want to risk it. What if Lady Guinevere is killed? The hatred of the nobles against the elves will grow. They'll easily slaughter the elves in the alienage and come for my clan, and they'll do so under the impression that they've saved themselves from some bogus elven illness. If we eliminate the Tevinter advisor, what are the repercussions?"

Josephine considered it. "Seeing as he is only an advisor... and a foreigner at that, he will be missed by the duke, not the nobility. Although, it will still cause a stir. Even then, it cannot be pinned back to us. It could easily be blamed on the machinations of their court, perhaps somebody jealous of the advisor's rising importance."

Leliana nodded. "Jester is one of my best. If you wish to plant misleading evidence as well, it can be done."

He placed both letters down on the table and deliberated over them, hoped against hope that his decision wasn't hasty. Wasn't misguided. No, he had to trust his instincts. Keep a level head. He gave Leliana a hard look.

"Do it. Get someone to destroy the lyrium in the well too."

"That could be dangerous," said Cullen. "They'll experience withdrawal. The city's environment is already tense."

"We'll have to keep a close eye on this then." This was more complicated than he'd expected. "But I can't, in good conscience, keep letting those people drink poisoned water."

"It will be done then," said Leliana.

Lavellan pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. "This takes so long," he said. "I wish I could go over there myself."

"It is frustrating, Inquisitor, I understand," said Josephine. "But you inevitably have greater control here. And away from the wrought atmosphere, it is likelier that you will think clearly."

"I know," he sighed. "And I'd be incredibly unhelpful if I was over there anyway. It's too personal."

"Precisely." She offered him a sympathetic smile. "And at this point, this is the best we can do. It does no good to deliberate too long on it. We must trust in our people."

He held his hands behind his back and wrung his fingers, staring at the small markers over the map.

"Perhaps the preparations for the upcoming Satinalia celebration may help take your mind off it,"

Josephine suggested. Satinalia, a celebration for the first day of winter, named after the second moon, Satina. A day for feasts, festivities, gift-giving and the wearing of masks.

Lavellan had finished the wood carvings for Solas in time but then, he'd decided to carve something for the inner circle too. So now, it felt weird giving it to just Solas. It was a collection now. So far, he'd finished the pieces for Solas, Cassandra, and the advisors.

“Is this really the time?” asked Cullen.

“We need to give our soldiers a break, Commander,” said Josephine. “Besides, Satinalia is a popular holiday, and it has pious roots. Many have expressed their wishes to celebrate in Skyhold.”

“And I already have my mask,” said Leliana curtly. “I quite like it. I will not have you ruin this opportunity for me, Commander.”

Cullen looked at Lavellan, trying to gather someone to his side.

Lavellan shrugged and smiled apologetically. “Sorry, Commander. I’m with them. I’ve already picked out my mask too.”

It was a wolf mask. Because Lavellan adored irony and terrible humour.

“Oh Commander, do not sulk,” crooned Josephine. “If we were in Antiva, the celebrations would last a week!”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen muttered. “Who can celebrate for that long?”

“Antivans,” said the other three in unison.

Satinalia was as rowdy as ever. Once Lavellan made his obligatory appearance and made the rounds greeting various important people, he snuck away. Lavellan peeled off the uniform of Inquisitor and slipped into comfortable clothes, then threw a cloak over himself. He stared at the wooden wolf mask in his hand, painted black and embellished with silver.

Lavellan wore it.

Would Solas wear a mask tonight?

Solas didn’t need Satinalia for the mask.

Lavellan descended and finally let loose, swung into the tavern.

Herald’s Rest was full of patrons, Bull and his gaudy mask right in the thick of things, while Varric was hosting a table of Wicked Grace in a corner. Sera and Dagna were talking animatedly upstairs.

Lavellan sat in on Varric’s game.

“Deal me in, Master Tethras,” he said, voice changed slightly by the reverb of the mask.

Varric looked up with an easy smile, his wooden half-mask painted red and lacquered.

“A mysterious figure come to challenge us?” asked Varric

“Come to take the whole pot, more like.”

“Put your coin where your mouth is, stranger.” He shoved the pot towards him.

Lavellan threw two silvers in, let Varric deal him in, and promptly won the whole pot after the round finished. He grinned behind his mask and relished the players’ incredulous remarks. They claimed it a fluke.

So Lavellan won the next pot.

And the next.

Varric threw his cards down in frustration. “Maferath’s balls, who the hell are you?”

Lavellan lifted his wolf mask and grinned. The entire table erupted with sounds of disbelief.

“Nobody will believe you,” he said and slipped away with a cackle, deliberately left his winnings on the table.

He did that for a while, swooping in on activities, sneaking into groups and sharing a laugh or two, helping with menial chores such as preparing the food. He'd either reveal himself or not. It depended on whatever struck his fancy. He later joined the cheese wheel race that Blackwall was running (after he'd crossed paths with Josephine, who'd been holding a bouquet of flowers with a gentle smile visible even through her golden mask), but Sera and Dagna teamed up. Lavellan lost to them.

“Good try,” chuckled Blackwall as he clapped Lavellan on the back. “They keep winning though. I've run out of treats to give out.”

“Pit them up against each other and host a bet.”

He laughed. “That may just work. I like it.”

“I bet Josephine liked the flowers even more.”

Blackwall’s laughter died and he stared at him, squinted. “How do you—” His eyes widened. “Inquisitor?”

Lavellan turned away. “Don’t know who that is.”

“*Everyone* knows who— Hey!”

But Lavellan was already running and crowing with mischievous glee. His raven perched on him momentarily, but he laughed and urged her to fly off.

“No, no, you’ll give me away! Go see if you can sneak small pebbles into people’s pockets or something.”

“Pebbles!” she said and flew.

He spotted Vivienne and Dorian walking across the battlements in conversation at one point, spectated on Scout Harding, Cassandra, and Leliana’s knife-throwing competition. Scout Harding won by a landslide.

As the night wore on, word of the Inquisitor in disguise had spread, so Lavellan took a break from giving elderly Sisters a heart attack and retreated to the battlements. A few people were still gathered here, but it was less crowded.

Where was Solas? Lavellan hadn't seen him at all the whole night. Granted, Skyhold was large. Still, contrary to popular belief, Solas was no hermit who shied away from large celebrations. That was what he wanted others to believe so he could join the celebrations in his own, unassuming way.

Within a blink and a breath, Cole was there, sitting on the battlements beside Lavellan. Cole wasn't wearing a mask, but he had difficulty distinguishing between the masks and actual faces so Lavellan wasn't surprised.

"Hello," Lavellan greeted and took his mask off. "Are you enjoying tonight?"

"Fraught, harried, must get the pies out in time before it burns. I calm her down. The pie isn't burned. They all like it. The hurts are less, softer. They don't need me tonight." He turned to Lavellan, then fell quiet, eyes widening. "It came off," he said. "I didn't know it came off."

Lavellan smiled. "They're masks Cole. You know my face. I couldn't have possibly changed it."

"Yes, you can." Cole tilted his head. *"Turn what hurts me into mine. You wear him on you so it doesn't hurt."* He looked away and watched the revelry beneath them.

The warmth and light from their fires danced and blurred in Lavellan's vision and he managed to relax, which was a luxury for him, so he savoured the moment. He watched everyone celebrating, his heart warm. These were the people he was fighting for.

"Words fall, flutter, and fracture her and I need to stop. Can't stop. Maker, what's wrong with me." Cole stood. "She needs me," he said.

Lavellan smiled at him. "Go on. I want everyone to be somewhat happy tonight. Even you."

"I'm happy when I help," he said and disappeared another breath and a blink later.

That left him alone once more. He observed for a while longer, smiled at the cheers and laughter, hoped that the stones of Skyhold would remember this merriment too so that it wouldn't only know of tragedy.

Lavellan donned his mask on once more and continued his roaming. The shadow of Skyhold. He'd lost some of his anonymity due to his earlier antics, so now, a few recognised him from the cloak and mask. He'd still vehemently deny it was him and claim, "What's an Inquisitor?"

That had earned him a few laughs.

He passed over Skyhold's garden, which was privy to lovers and soft conversations. Where could Solas be?

After roaming the battlements, Lavellan noticed a figure atop the gatehouse watchtower, had almost missed them because they were blending in with the dark sky. Had they been there for all this time?

Lavellan ascended that watchtower and joined them. The figure was observing the celebrations too, their back to him, but Lavellan already knew who it was.

Solas turned at his arrival. No mask. Or perhaps he had no need for one because he was already wearing it. He appraised Lavellan, eyes dancing with mirth, and pushed himself off the wall, clasped his hands behind his back.

“I heard a new game had been created tonight,” was Solas’ greeting. “I believe the Inquisition has taken to calling it Find the Inquisitor. It’s quite the notoriously hard game, I heard.”

“You’ve heard many things,” Lavellan replied.

Solas smiled at Lavellan’s voice, walked around him. “Do you know the rules of the game?”

Lavellan kept his gaze ahead and shrugged. “I don’t believe so. I’m afraid I don’t know what an Inquisitor is, you see.”

“It began simply, but now it has grown in complexity. First, they must find the Inquisitor, who is disguised. Some report that he is wearing the mask of a bear, others say a fox, others say a wolf. They say that he would either assist with chores, steal entire pots of winnings, or frighten Chantry Sisters. There is no clear pattern. He does as he wishes.”

Lavellan ducked his head and shook with silent laughter.

“If they spot him, they must engage him in conversation,” continued Solas. “Ask, ‘Are you the Inquisitor?’ and if his response is along the vein of, ‘What is an Inquisitor?’ then you have found him. The game does not end there, however.”

Solas stopped circling and stood in front of him again, eyes alight. “You must then get close enough to unmask him. I heard this was difficult. He was deft and agile, as capricious as the shadow of a flickering flame, and he flees in mad glee.”

Lavellan nodded. “Ah, yes. Mad glee.”

“If you are unable to physically unmask him, you must trick him into taking his mask off. Once he does, the game is won.”

“And what is the reward for unmasking this Inquisitor fellow?”

“That part they haven’t quite gotten to. He has not been caught yet.”

“I see. He seems tricky. Perhaps I should partake in the game.” He hadn’t realised that the others had made a game out of his antics. “And who, pray tell, invented this game?”

“Master Tethras, I believe. Expanded upon by the spymaster. Who knows? They may have already devised a reward.”

That did sound like something those two would do. Lavellan chuckled and stepped closer to Solas, tilted his head.

“Are you partaking in the game, then?” Lavellan asked.

“I already am,” he replied smoothly and grabbed the mask. Lavellan had no time to resist before Solas pulled it over his face, dropped the cloak’s hood in the process, and smiled at Lavellan’s dumbfounded look. “And I’ve already won. Hello, Inquisitor.”

He opened and closed his mouth like a displaced fish, before he snapped it shut with an indignant huff.

“There must be a mistake!” cried Solas. “He is not at all as deft as they say.”

“Excuse me?” Lavellan scoffed in false affront, and just to prove a point, he ducked from Solas’ grasp and slipped behind him. He placed his arms on Solas’ shoulders and leaned into it. Solas bent from the sudden weight with a surprised, “*Hrk.*”

“Who’s not deft now?” Lavellan challenged with a sunny grin.

“With all this weight, there is no way he is agile,” Solas challenged back.

“Ha!” He grabbed the wolf mask from Solas and put it back on. “Very well, I am indeed the Inquisitor. Guilty.”

Lavellan eased his weight off Solas and crossed his arms. Solas straightened and faced him once more, his smile fond, his gaze soft and glimmering. Lavellan lost his bearings for a breath.

“What is my reward?” Solas asked.

He raised his brow. Not that Solas would see it.

“What do you want? A kiss? I only kiss the holy light of the Maker, I’ll have you know. I am a devout man.”

“And yet,” he murmured, “you wear the Wolf.”

“Wolves are not limited to Fen’Harel,” he said. “Unless he has a monopoly on the wolf market, which I never realised existed.”

Solas laughed, as warm as the light of the flames and the gaiety of the celebrations.

“So what have you been up to?” Lavellan asked. “Or have you been watching from up here the whole night?”

“No, I only just got here minutes before you had. Earlier, I spoke with an Antivan philosopher for a good portion of the night. We discussed culture after he remarked that their celebrations would last a week, followed by another week of fasting.” That did sound like something Solas would do.

“And after, I came across a man challenging others to best him at Diamondback. I participated and became the next undisputed champion.”

“Alright, be honest. How many did you send away packing with barely anything to cover their bits?”

“Enough to amuse me.”

“You are terrible.” Lavellan laughed. “I suppose somebody managed to beat you since you’re no longer there.”

“No,” he said. “I just thought I’d give them a chance.”

Lavellan’s laughter doubled and he had to remove his mask because his breaths were too warm on his face.

“I see you’ve gotten into some mischief as well,” said Lavellan once his laughter had dwindled.

“Not as much as you.”

Lavellan smiled down at the wolf mask. Cole was right. Tonight, there was no room for sharp hurts. Tonight was a brilliant, anchoring lighthouse in the midst of the world's tempest, where scattered laughter could twinkle like the celestial bodies above.

"And so, you've won Find the Inquisitor," mused Lavellan. "Have you thought of your prize yet?"

Solas smiled up at the stars. "I already have it."

"What is it?"

His smile fell upon Lavellan, ancient sins tainting it with sorrow.

"Something I am undeserving of."

Chapter End Notes

There are holidays. In Thedas. Where is my in-game celebration, Bioware? Where is it?

I don't know shit about chess except how to move the pieces and I had to trawl through chess forums for help and have come out with even more respect and appreciation for chess players because that shit's hard.

One thing that always bothered me about Bull saying the Tal-Vashoth he encountered were all savage bastards was that Seheron was a really terrible place. Tal-Vashoth or not, anyone would crumble. They're not savage because they're Vashoth, they're savage because they've been forced to fight in a shithole. Even then, I doubt they were 'savage'. Likely suffering immense physical/mental/emotional stress and trauma. Also, they grew up under the Qun where their role was predetermined and those sent to Seheron were soldiers. That's all they've known their whole life. When you suddenly break away from the Qun, yea, you're gonna feel lost so you revert to something safe which for them is fighting.

Stillness in the sands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

statuary in the waiting—

At the end of Firstfall's first week, an urgent letter from Hawke and Warden Stroud arrived.

He hastened his preparations and travelled to the Western Approach with Cassandra, Solas, Sera, Dorian, and Bull, the journey taking just under two days, complete with the stops to camp for the night.

The blistering heat swept over them upon arrival at the desert front and Lavellan forgot that it was supposed to be winter, forgot the concept of *cold*. His tunic stuck, his hair matted, sweat slid down his back. But Creators, the *sand*. Wretched thing got everywhere. The forward camp was at least under shade. Small mercies.

"Inquisitor," greeted Scout Harding, tried to be cheery, but the heat and sand-strewn wind had dampened her spirits. "Welcome to the Western Approach." There was sand in her hair. There was sand in his boots. There was sand everywhere. "Hawke and Warden Stroud went to investigate Warden movement in the southwest. The rest of us couldn't get too close though. Between sandstorms and vicious wildlife and poison hot springs and a dragon that flew overhead... Well, this may just be the worst place in Thedas."

His hollow laugh sounded exhausted, even to him. And he'd only been here for two minutes. They accepted the cloaks offered to them to make trudging through the desert bearable.

"It's alright Scout Harding," he said. "You don't have to hold back. This place *is* terrible."

Sera made a noise behind him. "I've got sand in... places."

Harding grimaced in sympathy, hesitated for another second, then launched into a tirade which had Lavellan and Sera in stitches, inhaling sand and dry heat in their laughter.

Lavellan's throat must have been coated in sand by the time she'd finished. He coughed and rasped for water and Sera laughed at him and he spat the water out when another fit of laughter accosted him, which continued the loop.

"Stop laughing!" he yelled, trembling from barely held back wheezes.

Cassandra sighed, grabbed him and Sera by the back of their cloaks, and dragged them away so they could meet up with Hawke. Scout Harding waved at them while his raven perched on his shoulders.

Once they left the small ravine, the open desert greeted them, the Gamordan mountains distant and faint from the shimmer of heat. Sand entered his boots. Somehow, they made their way down his pants. He cringed.

"Is there a place, *any* place in the Maker-forsaken south, that isn't either completely wet, completely cold, or completely hot and sandy?" griped Dorian.

"The Hinterlands," answered Solas.

"The Hinterlands have been war-torn," said Cassandra.

"Still kind of nice," said Lavellan. "That area behind the farms? Really nice."

"Crestwood was nice when it wasn't raining," said Bull.

"Veil was damp." Lavellan made a face. "And there was a drowned village filled with waterlogged bodies possessed by spirits."

"Val Royeaux?" Bull offered.

"Full of prissy nobs," said Sera.

"Full of racist, prissy nobs," amended Lavellan. Solas made an agreeing noise and Sera scrunched her face.

"Well *I* like the desert," said Bull. "Sand looks gold, heat's energising."

Dorian gave him a squinted stare. "You're only saying that because you heard about the dragon."

"What? No."

At that moment, a high dragon roared overhead and flew into the distance.

Bull cackled in delight. "You're right, fuck this place, but look. At. *That!* Are you seeing this?" He turned to Lavellan, eye glimmering. "We're fighting her right, Mercy? *Tell* me we're fighting her!"

"If we get things sorted out here, maybe we can look into it."

He pumped his fists in the air and Dorian rolled his eyes, but Lavellan didn't miss his small smile.

The sun beat down on their backs and his nape burned, so he pulled his hood up. They stumbled across remnants of what could have once been ancient Tevinter structures, now eroded to nothing but the odd column or tower. In the distance, however, stood the ritual towers which had persisted despite the time and sands.

There was a small spark of light in one of them. He and his companions looked at each other, then hurried towards it.

Warden Stroud and Hawke were waiting before the bridge to it, hiding behind the columns. They reconvened at the mouth of the bridge.

"What's the situation?" Lavellan asked.

"A small group of Grey Wardens have gathered here," said Stroud. "They've already begun the ritual."

"It's blood magic," said Hawke. "I can feel it. We have to stop them before more people are hurt." She nodded at the bridge. "Take point, I'll take back."

Lavellan nodded and they fell into formation. They unsheathed their weapons and crossed the bridge, ascended the stairs to the tower.

"No, wait," whimpered a Grey Warden, backing away from his comrade. Knife out. Dorian cursed

behind Lavellan as they spotted the remaining two Grey Wardens with demons beside them.

“Come now,” crowed the nasally voice of Magister Livius Erimond. Lavellan’s blood boiled. “Warden-Commander Clarel’s orders were clear.”

“This is wrong!” the Warden protested.

Erimond curled his lips. “Remember your oath: In war, victory, in peace, vigilance. In death...”

The Warden’s comrade slipped behind and stabbed him. Lavellan ran.

A small rift opened and a rage demon was pulled into the world. The Warden bound the demon, and with a wave of Erimond’s hand, bound the Warden. His smarmy smile had Lavellan itching to throw his dagger at him.

Erimond spread his arms in welcome upon their arrival. “Inquisitor! Now this is a pleasant surprise.” He bowed. “Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium, at your service.”

Stroud glowered. “You are no Warden.”

“But you are.” Erimond sighed. “The one Clarel let slip. And now you found the Inquisitor and came to stop me. Shall we see how that goes?”

Lavellan watched the Wardens. Too late, they were bound, no better than walking corpses.

“It will go spectacularly,” said Lavellan, voice low and heavy with warning. “One of my daggers for each of your eyes. Should we see if it fits through the sockets?”

He chuckled. “If you can reach me, that is. Wardens, hands up.” He raised his hands and the Wardens followed. “Hands down.” They followed again and he laughed. “Would be a little difficult, no, Inquisitor?”

“Corypheus has taken their minds,” said Stroud.

“They did this to themselves.” Erimond clasped his hands behind his back and paced, as if he had all the time in the world. “You see, the Calling had the Wardens terrified. They looked everywhere for help.”

Lavellan glanced back at Sera and mouthed, “Nock.”

She readied an arrow, and he subtly gestured for her to wait.

“Even Tevinter,” muttered Stroud.

Erimond preened and went on and on. Blah, blah, kill the Old Gods, Corypheus is the best! Hey, look, blood magic, how neat! Ooh, spooky demon army.

“Demon army this, demon army that,” muttered Lavellan. “Are they at least getting paid for all their labour?”

“Such a kind soul you are,” Solas murmured dryly beside him, unheard by Erimond because he was still monologuing in the background. “Championing the cause of fair wages.”

“Fair wages are very important.”

“What the fuck are you two talking about?” Bull asked.

“Fair wages,” said Hawke solemnly. “It’s very important, he’s right. Know your worth.”

“Mercy, can I get a raise?”

“Are you kidding? How much do I already pay you?”

“Technically, Josephine pays us.”

“Can I shoot now?” asked Sera.

Lavellan glanced back at Erimond *still* wasting precious air with his overblown brags and wasn’t it terrible protocol to reveal your plans to your enemies? Either this man was blinded by his confidence or his foolishness. Then again, he was following Corypheus. It really was unfair of Lavellan to expect anything more from him.

“He’s *still* talking?” Lavellan asked.

“You should be listening,” hissed Cassandra.

“I was,” said Lavellan. “Demon army, Grey Wardens, blood magic, killing Old Gods, Corypheus, Tevinter is better than you, the Venatori kiss darkspawn ass. What’d I miss?”

“He’s got it,” said Dorian.

And Erimond was still talking. Lavellan grunted.

“Sera,” he said and sidestepped just as her arrow sailed past and found its mark in Erimond’s shoulder. The leather of his armour stopped most of it, but it was still enough damage.

He cried, cut off mid-monologue. Erimond raised his hand in desperation, connected with the Anchor in a bid to incapacitate Lavellan.

Lavellan strengthened the connection between them, overloaded the energy on his end, and severed the connection once the stirrings of a dull ache began. The expelled energy showered them in green and threw Erimond back.

“Ouch,” said Lavellan without any real sympathy. “This is not your day, is it?”

Erimond clutched a hand to his shoulder. “You fool! You don’t know what you’ve done! Now my master has to seek other ways into the Fade.”

“Tell him to try looking up his arsehole!” yelled Sera and loosed another arrow.

Erimond deflected it with a barrier and hobbled away.

“Wardens! Kill them!” he ordered.

Hawke fired a vicious yet controlled stream of electricity towards Erimond, the charge of it raising all the hairs on Lavellan’s arms. Erimond Fade-stepped away. She cursed, but they had no time to chase him because the Wardens and demons fell upon them.

Demons or no, the Wardens were still outnumbered and outmatched.

In the aftermath, Lavellan pursed his lips. What a waste of life. He couldn’t forgive what they’d done, but he could respect them at their deaths at the very least. Dying in unwilling servitude to Corypheus, a darkspawn, was one of the worst ways to die, especially for a Warden.

“You were right,” said Stroud to Hawke. “The mages are slaves to Corypheus.”

“And the Warden warriors have been sacrificed,” muttered Hawke and she looked down with a sigh. “What a waste.”

Lavellan crouched beside a dead Warden and moved their body into a less awkward position.

“Come help me with them,” he said.

“What are you doing?” asked Hawke.

“Lining them up for easy retrieval later. I’m sure their families would want to have the choice to bury or cremate them. If no family, we can at least afford to give them a respectful send-off.”

Cassandra was the first to step forward and help and the rest soon followed. It was a gruesome, morbid task, but they did it without complaint. After, Lavellan bowed his head and spent a moment in silence, before he turned and walked away.

“I believe I know where the Wardens are, Your Worship,” murmured Stroud, the atmosphere grave. “Erimond fled in that direction. There’s an abandoned fortress that way. Adamant.”

Lavellan nodded. “Can you and Hawke scout the fortress? Confirm if they really are there.”

Hawke nodded. “Alright. We also spotted a keep west of here. Full of Venatori. Maybe you’d like to knock and take over.”

“I most certainly will,” he said. They needed a base of operations in the Western Approach so they could plan the siege on Adamant. It was far more efficient to plan here than return to Skyhold. The two-day trip wasn’t worth it.

They returned to camp to freshen up and eat, then Lavellan dove into writing letters back to Skyhold. Letters to his advisors, and then letters to companions asking them to follow soon.

For the remainder of the day, he and his group chased rumours of the Venatori in the mines and stumbled across the remnants of the red lyrium experimentation which they'd now moved to Emprise du Lion. Later, they encountered the ruins where time had stopped. The Fade rift within hummed, but nothing else. Ambient magic which had built over the centuries congested the air and pushed into his throat like syrup.

Dorian squinted at the ancient Tevinter researchers, swept his gaze across the scene with a disgruntled sound, but said nothing else. Bull poked a demon. Sera smacked his hand away from it and shrieked.

Everybody jumped.

“Vishante kaffas!” cried Dorian. “Sera!”

“He was the one poking it!”

“Keep your hands to yourself,” Cassandra scolded. “We do not know what has caused this but I would rather we do not accidentally resume the chaos.”

They moved through the ruins and did exactly that.

“Why do I bother?” sighed Cassandra to herself as they hid in a corner while the demons and researchers duked it out. They stepped in once the Venatori cropped up. It seemed Corypheus was

intrigued by the ancient research that had gone on here as well, and Lavellan couldn't blame him because he was already wondering which of the Inquisition's scholars to assign here.

Dorian took ownership of the staff with the skull.

"If I'm going to be known as the untrustworthy and scary Tevinter mage, I may as well look the part," he sniffed.

"You're really not that threatening," said Bull.

"Excuse me?"

"You're like a pampered little cat, hissing and carrying on, but really, you're just fluffy and small aren't you," he cooed.

Dorian pointed the skull at him. "And you're an overexcited, slobbering goat."

"Hey, goats are cool."

Lavellan surveyed the ruins now free of the frozen rift, demons, and Venatori. The ancient researchers were on to something with the time magic. He just needed to know the mechanisms of it. It might explain his situation, hopefully, and give him an idea of whether he was stuck in a loop or if this was a last chance.

"Should I be worried about your fascination with time magic?" asked Solas.

"Be worried about everything I do," Lavellan answered. "I'm not trying to pull an Alexius if that's what you're asking. It just interests me. Its mechanisms, their repercussions."

"Oh yeah, that's great. Pretty, shiny magic," said Sera from near the door, rubbing her arms in discomfort. "Now can we go? This place makes my skin pucker."

"Oh come now Sera," teased Dorian. "It's atmospheric."

"It's frigging creepy, it is! This and your... creepy skull! Why couldn't you leave it? Who looks at a stick with some dead shite's head on top all covered in blood and thinks it's a good idea to swing it around?"

"What, and leave it here to be discovered by some other dreary Venatori? No, thank you. Besides, the staff was merely a conduit. It's essentially just like any other staff. No special time magic imbued into it."

"I *don't* wanna know!"

"Come on," Lavellan said. "Sera's right. This whole place feels like the taste of stale, morning-after ale in your mouth."

"Colourful as always," sighed Cassandra and he grinned.

They waited a few more days for the rest of his companions and the Inquisition forces to arrive so they could storm the keep Hawke had mentioned. Once they had that stable base of operations,

they prepared for a siege in earnest. Most of the month's first half was spent stabilising the Western Approach and sorting the issue of water for the keep.

Lavellan wasn't blind to the strange tension between Bull and Solas though. It wasn't dissentious, not really. More... anticipatory, building like the pressure and fumes in an alchemical reaction, which left Lavellan wondering when the cork would pop or the bottle would break. They'd been like this ever since their return from the Coast.

They were on the way to an oasis to clear it of the varghests when Solas broke the silence.

"You are not Tal-Vashoth, Iron Bull. Not really."

Bull shot him a hesitant glance as if it were a trick question. "Well that's a fuckin' relief. You know, Mercy said the same thing."

Solas dug his staff into the sand to push himself along, humming in consideration. "I imagine he would."

"Why's that?"

"We understand you are no beast snapping under the stress of the Qun's harsh discipline. You are a man who made a choice... possibly the first of your life."

"I've always liked fighting," Bull said, uncharacteristically soft. "What if I turn savage like the other Tal-Vashoth?"

Ahead of them, Cole tilted his head, but said nothing.

"You have the Inquisition. You have the Inquisitor," said Solas, then paused. He looked at Bull and offered him a smile. "You have me."

Bull blinked at him, then he returned the smile. "Thanks, Solas."

Lavellan observed the interaction with an uncertain frown. That... wasn't what he'd expected. He watched the back of Solas' hood as if that would give him the answer to his unknown question.

They reached the oasis, but rather than kill the varghests, Cole suggested luring them to another oasis since they were the one disrupting them. This way, the varghests would live and have a new habitat, and the soldiers would have water. Once they scouted another oasis, they taunted the creatures, and that was how the four of them ended up running across the desert with three angered varghests hot on their tail.

Bull tripped.

"Man down, man down!" Bull shrieked.

It turned out alright, in the end.

They returned to the first oasis to ensure it was safe as a water source. All four of them collapsed beneath a single tree instead, enticed by the water and shade and prospect of rest. Cole refilled their skins then wet a cloth, offered it to Solas. Solas draped it over his head and Lavellan swore the cloth steamed. At least he was wearing shoes this time.

"Is your head burnt?" asked Lavellan.

"Ah, no. The cloak protected it from the sun and I have learned the magic to prevent sunburn on a

bald head.”

Lavellan hadn't expected that either and he erupted into an exhausted laugh. “Aren't you full of surprises?”

Solas smiled. “Quite.”

They relaxed once more. A short reprieve amid the tense and stressful circumstances in the Approach. Always something new in this place. Be it chasing bandits away, running from varghests, or stumbling across the place where an Old God was sleeping beneath. Yes, *that* had been disconcerting. They'd left immediately. He suspected that was where the Wardens intended to enter the Deep Roads if they succeeded. Which they wouldn't.

At least, he hoped so.

“How do you feel, Iron Bull?” Solas asked after a blissful span of relaxation in the quiet. “Do you need a distraction to focus your mind?”

“Area's low on dancing girls, sadly. Unless one of you wants to slap on a skirt and a wig and dance?”

“Do you *really* want to see that?” asked Lavellan and drank from his waterskin.

“Would be fucking hilarious, I think.”

Solas locked his hands over his stomach and leaned back. “King's pawn to E4.”

“You're shitting me.” Bull turned his head to scowl at Solas, his horns catching on a low-hanging branch. “We don't even have a board!”

“Too complicated for a savage Tal-Vashoth?”

“Play nice, you two,” mumbled Lavellan as he pulled the hood over his eyes and reclined against the tree.

“Smug little asshole,” Bull grumbled. “Pawn to E5.”

“Pawn to F4. King's Gambit.”

“Accepted. Pawn takes pawn. Give me a bit to get the pieces settled in my head. Then we'll see what you've got.”

“I look forward to it.”

Bull grumbled further. “Hey Mercy, what're his tactics?”

“Be careful when you think you're winning,” said Lavellan.

“That's really not helping.”

“Hey, Mercy?” asked Bull as Lavellan prepared the final dragon lure.

“Hm?”

“You’re the fucking best.”

“I know.”

His advisors arrived by the end of the second week and they planned the assault on Adamant before Warden-Commander Clarel could do anything drastic. The spies Leliana had sent reported that the Wardens had moved their plans forward, but they hadn't been able to determine anything else.

More of the Inquisition’s forces arrived with Dagna among them. She arrived with a beam and an intimidating stack of crates arrayed behind her.

“Inquisitor!” she chirped. “I’ve got a surprise for you!” She twirled a crowbar in her hand and handed it to him with a flourish, patted the uppermost crate. “Would you like to do the honours?”

Lavellan took it. “What’s this?”

She rocked on the balls of her feet, grin widening somehow. “Open it!”

Some of his companions came to check what the fuss was about.

“What’s this, Widdle?” asked Sera.

“He has to open it first.”

Lavellan pried the crate open, unfolded the cloth, and gasped. Dagna was practically vibrating on the spot.

“So? What do you think? If I hadn’t helped Harritt, he would still be on the second one! He’s great, but no offence, a little inefficient, so I sped things up a little but don’t be mistaken! Quality isn’t affected whatsoever! Do you like it?”

He took out the twin daggers he'd commissioned, lazurite blades dark and gleaming with a touch of a violet sheen when the light hit it right. Runes had been inscribed on each fuller — one faintly glowed a vivid red, the other gold. Lavellan tested their weight, how they felt in his hands.

“It’s perfect,” he breathed.

Dagna’s face gleamed like the sun. “You see the one that glows red? Careful with that one! You cut with it and it’ll feel like the wound’s on fire so, uh, maybe don’t wave it around?”

Lavellan promptly grabbed the sheath that had come with it and put it back.

“The gold one’s good against demons! And undead. And uh, anything that’s not alive? Biologically speaking that is. Alive, not alive, binary classifications assigned to— Well, never mind!”

“You’re so frigging cute,” Sera muttered behind him, sounding dangerously close to squishing her.

“Sera, I got you your arrows! It explodes on cont—”

She didn't finish the rest of her sentence because Sera was already hugging Dagna.

The companions who'd made requests for new weapons or armour came forward and opened theirs, praising the craftsmanship or the enchantments. Dagna approached Lavellan after explaining to the others the properties of their gear.

“Whew, I'm glad the reception was great,” she said. “I was worried for a minute.”

“They're brilliant, Dagna. I'm impressed you got them done so quickly.”

“I got very excited,” she admitted. “And so did everyone who worked on them. I haven't quite finished the hook and chain you wanted. Some bits just aren't clicking yet, you know? But I think I'm close to figuring something out so I guess, what I'm saying is, you're not allowed to die yet.”

He blinked down at her.

She wagged her finger at him. “And I've got an idea for your raven too! I was thinking we could fit her with a kind of surveillance or recording equipment so she can be your own little feathery spy. I've got so many amazing things lined up. You *have* to see them.”

“Alright Dagna,” he said and held out a fist. She bumped it. “No dying until I see the cool things you'll make.”

“I take fist bumps very seriously, Inquisitor,” she warned gravely.

“I can believe that.”

Adamant had been brutal last time. The Wardens would be difficult enemies, the demons more so, and he knew that no matter what he did, it would be bloody and arduous, so Lavellan had started personally training the scouts in fighting demons. He'd feared they'd be too intimidated of him, but it had proved the opposite and they'd learned fast.

The other problem was the journey through the Fade. He scanned his companions, determined who would take to the physical journey well so he could allocate the teams. Last time, Solas, Cole, and Sera had fallen with him. Sera and Cole hadn't taken it well so he'd station them to the battlements, far away from him. Varric then. Cassandra maybe? Bull? Dorian? No, better limit the mages. Dorian and Vivienne had different views to Solas regarding the Fade.

He watched the sands stretching into the distance and sighed.

“This is going to be shit.”

The door to Adamant splintered from the battering ram and Lavellan led the Inquisition with a rallying cry, wreathed in the flames of his elixirs.

It was dark and cold, and blood baptised his daggers. Fitting. The Herald of death.

They worked their way through Adamant, navigated the chaos, convinced a few Wardens to stand down, slashed and stormed his way through the ranks. He assigned his fighters to help on the

battlements and pursued Warden-Commander Clarel. They crashed their little blood magic party.

Lavellan used some of the Wardens' doubts to convince them that this was inane and countered Erimond.

Then came the Maker-damned dragon.

"Oh, there it is," Lavellan said blithely and rolled away from the stream of its fire. Demons poured from the rift Clarel had opened, which included a hulking Pride demon. A few of the Wardens helped. Lavellan truly adored the bonding experience that came with the realisation of betrayal and the crushing weight of guilt. A spectacular way to spend a Wednesday evening.

With the Pride demon defeated, he pursued Clarel and left the rest of the demons to the Wardens. Solas, Bull, Varric, and Cassandra followed.

He gave them a look over his shoulder as they ran.

"Save it," said Bull. "Not getting us to leave."

"What he said," said Cassandra.

Lavellan snorted and laughed, faced forward once more. "I was going to say thank you, you cretins."

"Am I a cool cretin?" asked Bull.

"Bash a few more demons in the face and I'll think about it."

"Fuck yeah."

They followed Clarel, quite literally hot on her coattails. The blighted dragon coasted overhead.

Lavellan's raven swooped and soared over them, cawed twice, then swerved away. A warning. Lavellan poured the flask of frost over his armour.

They turned the corner and ran into a rage demon. It froze upon contact with him.

Cassandra smashed and shattered the demon with her shield.

"Get out of here!" Lavellan told the raven. "There's a damned dragon sharing air space!"

She cawed indignantly but obeyed.

Hawke and Stroud met up with them again. The bridge they'd fallen off of last time approached, and Lavellan had no time to hesitate, flexed his fingers instead in preparation of what was to come.

Clarel and Erimond hissed and spat at one another, traded blows with their spells and magic. They stopped where the bridge ended and Clarel fired a well-placed shot at Erimond.

He fell. But he inched towards the edge of the bridge.

Clarel blocked his path and blasted him with another stream of lightning. He skidded back, spasmed on the ground for a few moments, and curled up into a ball.

"You could have served a new god," Erimond croaked.

"I will *never* serve the Blight."

Corypheus' dragon swerved towards them and Lavellan sprinted, yelled for Clarel to move. Too late.

The dragon landed, snatched her in its mouth.

Jagged teeth snapped shut.

Crunched.

It flew and perched on one of the spires, threw her body away as if she were stuffed with straw. Clarel laid motionless, blood staining the stones.

"Shit," hissed Hawke.

The dragon crept towards them, blocking their only exit. Lavellan eyed the edge.

Here lay the abyss.

Clarel pushed herself up. Stroud made a choked and relieved sound. She made a valiant effort of crawling towards her staff, the dragon hovering directly over her.

She held her hand up against it.

And released an impressive spell that sent the dragon crashing, its large body and desperate clawing destroying the ancient stones of the bridge. It fell over the edge with a cacophonous screech.

But the stupid thing could fly and off it went on its merry way to lick its wounds while Lavellan's team sprinted away from the crumbling edge.

It was no use.

As they plummeted towards an unforgiving drop, Lavellan reached, as if he were to open a sunder. But not this time. Not a punch, not a clean hole through. He grasped the Veil.

He *cleaved* it open as lightning and fire tore into his bones, goring the muscle of his arm. Lavellan couldn't even scream.

The rift yawned wide.

And they fell.

Chapter End Notes

Erimond can choke on a rotting grape skin since he jacks off to Corypheus so much. They look the same. Practically twins. Rotting grape skin = Corypheus. Don't @ me, I'm right.

Listen, I know I said I'd slow updates down to once a week starting from now but listen, listen, I'm a bit excited to throw the Fade chapters at you SO I'm extending it to another week. Bi-weekly updates will continue until next week and then for real, slow

down to every Thurs.

The Western Approach is pretty in that barren desert kind of aesthetic but I hate it anyway because companion banter doesn't fire there so what's the point?

Assemblage of the asinine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

meld sinew into wine—

Lavellan fell skywards.

But the sky was beneath him, and above him, the earth. A simulacrum of the sun peered through the gaps of the mighty stone pylons adrift in the space, its light strident against the green skies.

He hovered to a near stop, the ground stretching above him. Lavellan reached.

The world violently upended and dumped him onto the ground. He fell with a grunt, vision swimming with green. Once his vision settled and he regained his bearings, he pushed himself up

—

And was immediately bombarded with the sensation that he was *wrong*.

Lavellan sucked in a harsh breath through clenched teeth. The sensation pressed into him like needles, branching after breaching skin. An opposing tide roared within him and battered against the needles, but all it did was splinter and scatter them, thorns in his bloodstream.

“We were falling,” groaned Stroud.

“And now we’ve landed,” grunted Hawke, hand clutched to her head.

Solas stared upon the aberrant sky with the same wonder as before. “We’re in the Fade,” he breathed. “Physically! Look, the Black City, close enough to touch.”

“You *would* be excited,” said Varric as he picked himself up off the ground.

“Oh yeah, must be a dream come true for your crazy ass,” said Bull.

“Quite literally,” Solas replied.

“Explains why it looks different then,” said Varric. “Hey Hawke, remember when we went to the Fade?”

“You mean when all my friends betrayed me?”

He chuckled nervously. “We... got better?”

Hawke huffed, but there was no real venom behind it.

“How did this happen?” asked Cassandra.

“I opened a rift,” said Lavellan and his voice was *wrong*. Wrong how? It sounded the same, he said the words the same, but it just wasn’t right. Too rigid. Too fluid. Too... *something*. It hadn’t been like this last time. What was wrong with him?

Lavellan hugged himself, the others’ discussion dulling in his ears. He felt like a thread being

pulled from the hem, like a tight coil of string unravelling. His skin was too tight and too loose all at once. He scrunched his eyes shut.

“Inquisitor?”

Lavellan opened his eyes. Solas' brows were scrunched in worry, everyone else still arguing and discussing ahead.

“Are you alright?” asked Solas.

He'd meant to say, “Yes,” but all that came out was a choked whimper.

Solas stepped closer, shielding him from the others' sight. “Visions?” he asked.

“No.” He looked down at his tremulous hands. Melting. Caged. “I feel like the wrong ends of a magnet being forced together. Repelling but something is pushing. What’s wrong with me?”

Solas' frown deepened.

“You alright, Mercy?” Bull called out and everyone looked at Lavellan.

Lavellan pressed his lips and shut it away. Shut that sensation away. He needed to go. They needed him to go, to function, to lead.

“Fine,” he said and walked ahead, steps heavy yet light, and patted Solas in thanks on the way. “Let’s get out of here.”

The Fade was as he remembered. Floating obelisks of stone reached for the emerald skies while around them were pools of water glimmering like thick metal. Fragments of the real world had been assembled here. A length of wall of Marcher origin here, another of Fereldan make over there, stone statues with Orlesian ornamentation, columns and arches from bygone ages. All of them had been assembled into something that resembled the real world in a way that was *just* right but also on this side of wrong. Uncanny. Unsettling.

“*Hey, Chief, let’s join the Inquisition! Good fights for a good cause!*” Bull said, mimicking Krem’s voice (though it sounded nothing like him). “I don’t know Krem, I heard there were demons. *Agh, don’t worry about the demons, Chief! I’m sure we won’t see many!*” He grumbled under his breath. “Asshole! Guys, if I get possessed, feint on my blind side, then go low. Cullen says I leave myself open.”

Varric shot him a concerned look. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

A soft glow in Lavellan's periphery caught his notice.

He turned his head. In the near distance, on a small isle above the metallic waters, stood a lone table with a golden, humanoid wisp sitting upon a chair. Lavellan tilted his head, drawn to its presence. He hadn't realised he was approaching until Cassandra pulled him back by the collar like a huffed mother bear.

“And *where* are you going?” she asked. “Do not wander.”

“Yes,” said Solas. “Your emotions and intentions will shape the environment around you. Stay focused, and we will be out of here before you know it.”

Lavellan held her wrist and gently pried it off, marvelled at how... solid she was. How solid he

wasn't. Or maybe he was *too* solid.

“Wait,” he murmured and neared it, water splashing but not wetting. The wisp turned its head at his arrival but did nothing else besides tremble in place, the waves of its timorous fear washing over Lavellan. He crouched beside the chair, held his hand out, and the wisp reached for him.

And he *felt*.

They were once a Pilgrim, faith aflame within their heart as they came to the Conclave to help. To serve the Maker. They prayed for peace, but instead, the mountains fell and trapped them and crushed their legs and oh, did the darkness descend. Ravenous, hissing, cackling. A fear of a world without a Maker, with only gloom and rot and fading within dreams.

Light. Where was the light? Lead the way, be a guide for the final hours. Without terror, without confounding darkness.

Lavellan stood and surveyed the area. His emotions and intentions could shape the Fade? Good. Give him light, something small, something warm.

On a nearby stone rested a red candle, its small flame flickering. Lavellan took the candle and returned, placed it on the table.

“A light to guide you,” he said.

The wisp reached for the candle and vanished with a breath, dissipated with the flame, left naught but a melted stub. Calm enveloped him and the feeling of wrongness abated, if a little. He could now at least function and think better.

“What was that?” asked Varric.

“They were afraid,” said Lavellan. “They were at the Conclave, buried under mountain and stone. They wanted light; I gave them light.”

“At the Conclave?” asked Cassandra. “What do you mean?”

“It must have been a soul,” said Solas, “trapped within the Fade because of the spirit which commands this domain. The Inquisitor set them free by removing what had trapped them here.”

“Which is?”

“Fear.” Solas looked around him. “We must be in the domain of a variety of fear demon.”

“Oh fan-fucking-tastic,” said Bull.

Solas frowned at Lavellan again. “How did you realise?”

Had Lavellan noticed the souls before? No, he didn't think so.

“They were stuck here,” Lavellan explained. “It wasn't right, so I changed it.”

“Well, that's cryptic,” muttered Varric.

Frustration crawled beneath his skin. It was not. It made perfect sense but they weren't looking. It was a simple chain of thinking!

“Makes sense to me,” he said, did his best to keep his irritation out of it.

“Their state of stagnancy is wrong because souls are not meant to linger in the Fade,” said Solas. “Is that what you were trying to say?”

“That. And they were scared. Linger here scares them, but they linger because they’re scared. It’s a cycle. It’s terrible. I hate it. I hate whoever has this domain.”

“So you just essentially ferried a soul through the Fade?” asked Hawke.

“I guess?”

“Is there *anything* you wouldn’t save?”

Lavellan didn’t even pause. “Coryphefuss,” he said, lamenting that Sera wasn’t here to start a chain of terrible names for Corypheus. One of their rounds had gotten so terrible once that they’d had to end it at *Carp of the Foots*. Then again, it was a good thing she wasn’t here otherwise she’d lose her shit. Creators knew Lavellan was.

They fought through their first wave of demons and took different paths until they found the one which would lead them up.

Hawke pointed at the stairs. “There!”

They ascended, though they didn’t get any further, stopped by the sight of the figure in the Chantry robes glaring like a beacon against the dreary emerald backdrop of the Fade.

Cassandra let out a shaky exclamation.

“Divine Justinia?” Cassandra asked, like a child asking for their parent after a nightmare. “Most Holy?”

Divine Justinia smiled. “Cassandra,” she greeted, nodding at the rest of them with a serene smile.

Cassandra tightened her grip on her sword even as her expression shifted from the vulnerability of her sorrow. “Be wary, Inquisitor,” she warned. “We know the spirits lie.”

“Right, at this point, I’m convinced I’m in a nightmare,” said Varric.

Justinia clasped her hands in front of her. “You are almost correct,” she said. “The demon who holds dominion over this domain serves Corypheus. It is the Nightmare you forget upon waking. It grows fat upon the memories of fear and darkness. The false Calling which terrified the Wardens into making such grave mistakes? Its work. And now, Inquisitor, it has taken your memories too.”

Stroud scowled. “I would gladly avenge the insult this Nightmare dealt my brethren.”

“No,” said Hawke, “stop that. Are you going to believe this immediately? How could the Divine have survived the Fade?”

“You are all here physically, are you not?” Justinia asked.

“That’s different. We’re here because of the Inquisitor’s mark.”

“And I am here for the same reason.”

“Who is *I*, exactly?” asked Hawke. “A demon? What are you?”

“I am here to help.”

“Really? Because from what I hear — and correct me if I’m wrong because it’s not like the entirety of Thedas went to shit when it happened — you died at the Conclave. Or at least, got stuck here. You called him Inquisitor. You couldn’t possibly know that.”

“Couldn’t I? I have examined memories like his, stolen by the Nightmare demon.” She returned her attention to Lavellan. “When you entered the Fade at Haven, the demon took a part of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it.”

Had he done something different in the Fade after the Conclave?

“These are your memories, Inquisitor.” She nodded at a small group of wraiths roaming the field ahead.

“Those are demons,” grunted Bull. “They’re not looking very memory-like to me.”

“They safeguard the shards of his memories. Defeat them, and you will free the memories.”

“That makes no sense but I just walked under a floating rock so what the fuck do I know?”

They dealt with the wraiths, easily taken care of.

Lavellan eyed the shards of memory glimmering on the ground, glanced at Divine Justinia. She nodded and he took a deep breath, gathered the scattered shards of memory, erratic and luminous in his hands.

The memories of the Conclave and his meeting with Corypheus flashed in everyone's mind.

Lavellan shook his head once the visions ended, the emotions of the event returning to him like a slow-falling curtain.

“Well,” said Varric, “that was fun.”

“So your mark did not come from Andraste?” asked Stroud as he recovered. “It came from the orb Corypheus used in his ritual.”

Solas averted his gaze. Cassandra looked as gutted as she had after Lavellan had stabbed her.

“Corypheus intended to use the power within the orb to rip open the Veil,” said Justinia from behind them, “use the Anchor to enter the Fade, and throw open the doors of the Black City. When the Inquisitor disrupted his plans, the orb bestowed the Anchor upon him instead.”

“For future reference, please never knock a magical item of considerable power onto the floor ever again,” Lavellan said. “What if it broke?”

“*That’s* your concern?” Varric asked.

It was a very real concern. He couldn’t let it break, not this time. “Look, a lot of weird things have happened to me,” said Lavellan in a bid to defend himself. “The only way I can function is if I compartmentalise the weird things.”

“That’s great and all,” said Bull, “but how do we actually get the hell out of here?”

“You cannot leave the Nightmare’s lair until you regain all that it took from the Inquisitor,” she said. “It now knows you’re here. Make haste. I will prepare the way ahead.” She turned and walked. His companions shared a look before they followed, but they lost sight of her after she turned at a column of stone.

Cassandra sighed, the tension that had been threaded through her spine easing. “Was that really Most Holy?”

Lavellan squeezed her shoulder. She was likely a spirit of Hope or Faith who'd been drawn to Divine Justinia's convictions and had taken on her identity and memories.

“We don't know, but she wants to help,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“Well she hasn't bribed us or tried to possess us so far. Good signs, right?”

“I'm more concerned about this Nightmare demon,” said Hawke.

Varric made a disdainful noise. “Sounds like it preys on fear. Steals people's memories. Low, even for a demon. Memories make us who we are, what we are. Every mistake, every regret, it builds us and lets us grow and learn.” His fervour and conviction spilled with every word and Lavellan recalled all the reasons why he liked Varric. “A monster that takes them away? I don't want to think about that.”

Solas had been silent so far.

Lavellan sent him a discreet look. He was busy taking everything in, listening to the conversation, observing his surroundings, lingering, existing, almost slipping into obscurity. Of course he was comfortable here. The roamer of the Beyond.

They continued through the Fade. Another friend of theirs had been silent too. The Nightmare demon's taunts hadn't come yet.

Of course, just as he thought that—

“Ah, we have a visitor,” purred a deep and gravelly voice. Almost soothing if not for the vestiges of its echoes in Lavellan's head. “Some foolish little boy come to steal the fear I kindly lifted from his shoulders.”

“I hate the talky ones,” grumbled Bull.

“You should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay. Forgotten.”

Lavellan powered through and slayed demons.

“You think that pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your mind with such drivel? The only one who grows stronger from your fear is *me*.”

Lavellan counted his flasks. Six left.

“But you are a guest, here in my home. By all means, let me return what you have forgotten.”

The others stared at Lavellan, who still wasn't paying the demon any attention.

“Hey, uh, you're hearing this right?” asked Bull.

“Hm? Oh yeah. I tuned it out.”

The Nightmare chuckled. “Such courage,” it crooned. “Here you are, trying to change things, but it will all amount to nothing. Nothing you do will change anything. You will make the same mistakes

and everyone will suffer for it and you will succumb to your rage once more. What will your followers do when their guiding flame becomes a forest fire?"

Lavellan clenched his jaw.

"They will snuff it out."

"I have heard of trees with seeds that only germinate in a forest fire," said Solas, undercutting the Nightmare's ominous words.

"Come to your rescue, has he?" mocked the Nightmare. "Your vigilant protector? Or the shadow licking and biting at your heels?"

The corners of Solas' mouth tightened. Any semblance of reassurance Lavellan might have gotten from Solas' earlier remark vanished.

"Tell me, little boy, what will he do if he finds out, if they all find out, about the truth of you?"

All the blood fled Lavellan's face. It wouldn't dare—

The others looked back at Lavellan with mixed reactions, all of them unsure.

The Nightmare laughed, booming and cacophonous. "Your terror is *delightful*. So much to work with."

Lavellan had no clever words to retort with, off-kilter and outbalanced, but the Nightmare said nothing else. It had gotten what it had wanted. For all its taunts, it would never reveal the truth of someone because reconciliation could follow despite the initial fear. It was enough to dangle the threat of discovery. No reconciliation then. Only the constant dreading, constant waiting for an unseen fall.

"We all have something to hide," said Solas. "Come, lethallin. Pay it no heed. Let us recover yourself and find a way out of here."

Lavellan couldn't look him in the eyes. "I thought this was a dream come true for you."

"Not in the company of Fear."

He still felt rigid and raw and wrong, but Lavellan found another burst of determination and pushed through.

Eventually, he felt the pull of another dreamer's fear and followed it to a skeleton crumpled in a niche, a golden wisp imprisoned within its ribcage. Lavellan offered his hand again. The dreamer reached out with a tendril of light between the ribs.

Regret, guilt, and pride burbled and dripped from the Freeholder's lips, their veins being set alight. The Blight had taken the land. The Freeholder stayed and tended his fields even as the poison took their crops, their livestock, his family, himself. In his delirious fever dreams, the poison would take the world. Foolish in his pride, had paid the price with his and his family's life.

This poison could not take everything. Reveal the endurance of life, the survival of this world.

Some seeds only germinate in a forest fire.

Lavellan straightened and wandered the surroundings as his companions watched on in interest.

Seed. New life, growing in a pile of ashes and—

On a small, dry patch of land, a lone flower grew. Lavellan waded through the water to pluck it and returned to the soul, knotted the stem around one of the ribs, over where the heart would have been.

“Life returns,” he said. “No poison can deter it.”

The soul pulsed with a warm glow then faded, drained the red from the flower and left the petals pristinely white. More of the calm enveloped him. The wrongness faded further.

“There,” he murmured and they continued. Solas shot him curious looks along the way.

As they navigated the Fade, they came across small manifestations of their fears. Hawke expressed her distaste at the spiders, but everybody saw something different. Lavellan had faced versions of his sister last time, possessed by varying types of demons, which had taken him back to when he'd been a small, frightened child who would hug tiny Ellana in her sleep in the hopes that it would keep the demons away.

This time, Lavellan stared down Cassandra. Cassandra as she'd been in the ~~future~~ past, aged, her hair longer, smiling sadly as blood dripped from her lips and Lavellan couldn't breathe. The world collapsed around him. He jerked back and collided against the actual Cassandra. She steadied him. He flinched away from her, hands slick—

“Inquisitor, look out!”

One of the Fear-Cassandras took the dagger protruding from her stomach and slashed at Lavellan. He managed to dodge.

Lavellan took a step back. And another. And another. He retreated while she advanced.

“Why?” she asked, features twisting from anguish. “I was loyal, I was faithful! Yet you repaid me with death!”

Trapped. He couldn't raise his daggers or his arms, stared ashen-faced at her, unable to look away from the gushing wound in her stomach.

“They're not real!” cried Hawke and shouldered him out of the way. She eviscerated Fear-Cassandra with a bright flash of electricity and Lavellan gritted his teeth at her tormented cry.

“Stop,” he gasped, pulling at Hawke's arm.

“It's not real,” she affirmed and resisted his weak tugs. “Whoever you're seeing, it's not them.”

They defeated the fearlings.

The ensuing silence strangled him and he dropped his daggers, covered his face with trembling hands.

How in the Dread Wolf's great heaving ass was that a minor fear?

It wasn't. The Nightmare demon must have taken offence and now Lavellan was suffering for it. Said Nightmare demon laughed, which confirmed his suspicions.

“Poor Inquisitor Lavellan,” it cooed. “What did you see? Go on and tell them. Is death the way you repay loyalty? Look how they fight for you. Do they know their service will end with your blade in

their chests? You kill the traitors, you kill the devoted. You destroy everything you touch.”

“Untrue,” scoffed Cassandra, sneering at the sky. “We receive weekly shipments of fresh produce from the Hinterlands, brimming with letters from thankful refugees. Daily, we shelter those in need. He has made a space of peace and faith and hope and he fights to defend it. The only thing he destroys is the poison from those who would seek to corrupt that peace. Beings such as you.”

“Yeah, so you better watch out,” Bull taunted.

Lavellan pulled his hands down, stared wide-eyed at them over his fingers.

The Nightmare responded with another laugh. “Look at your defenders! Commit this image to memory. Remember it when you inevitably fail them.”

It left them in a silence that crushed his ribs like a shoe would a fallen autumn leaf.

“Solas is right,” said Cassandra, eyes blazing, faith so terribly misplaced. “Pay it no heed.”

But the Nightmare was right, it was right and I’ve doomed you all before and who’s to say it won’t happen again—?

“It’s trying to hit where it hurts, don’t mind it,” said Varric, his tone and expression softening. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said. Reflex at this point.

“No, you’re not,” said Hawke.

Lavellan picked his daggers up and sheathed them, let the hilts hit the scabbards’ rims with an air of finality. “I said I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“Hey, slow down,” said Bull. “We can rest for a bit, let you breathe for a while.”

“Indeed,” said Solas. “The Nightmare has made an exception of you. Whatever you saw were clearly not minor fears.”

Lavellan turned and walked. “It’s fine. I said it’s fine. Leave it alone.”

“You are not,” Solas insisted.

Lavellan gnashed his teeth and whirled on them, spat, “What, you all want to lord over me how right you are *that* much?”

His face fell immediately after the outburst, regret swift to surface as his companions stared at him in varying degrees of surprise. Solas frowned.

“Sorry,” Lavellan whispered. “I’m sorry. That was— That was uncalled for. I’m sorry. Please, just... leave it.”

“Worship, we are only worried about you,” said Stroud. “Truthfully, how are you? You know we will accommodate for you as you would no doubt do for us.”

“I’m surviving,” he said. “Accommodate for me by continuing.”

He pushed through. It was the only thing he could do. For a choking second, the world-weariness returned to press on his shoulders, the overwhelming urge to fall on the ground and never get up

tempting him. But no. He pressed onwards.

The world waited for no one. Either flow with the currents or smash into a rock.

His companions followed, shot each other uncertain looks, and Lavellan ignored their stares.

As they searched for the Divine, they came across the fear of another soul — a Grey Warden who had succumbed to the Calling, fearing that they'd walked to their death. They cursed their fate, their destiny of supposed glory and eventual death.

They wanted the choice. This death would be theirs, not an unseen hand of fate, not the merciless wheel of destiny.

Lavellan's heart and spirit shrivelled in its sympathy. Others may welcome the notion of destiny and the judgement of some greater power guiding their actions, but Lavellan couldn't find it in him to accept that all his hardships, all his suffering, were being guided by some higher power. Let this be his choice. Let the burdens and the sacrifices be his, because for it to be otherwise was cruel.

Destiny. How to break destiny?

His gaze locked onto an object floating in the waters of a nearby puddle. Lavellan retrieved it.

It was a tarot card depicting a skull with an unhinged jaw, eye sockets covered by the wings of a red butterfly. The banner beneath read: Fate.

Lavellan returned to the soul, ripped the tarot card, and placed it in the cauldron beside the soul.

The soul rushed forward, filling the cauldron and swirling within its depths, then passed on. At the bottom of the cauldron laid a new card. Whole and not ripped.

Fate had become Change.

He picked it up. The card now depicted a two-headed raven with the tips of its wings aflame. When Lavellan reversed it, the raven became a skeleton of itself, one of the heads severed as the remaining head cawed skywards in grief. The word on the banner became *Entropy*. Another reversal reverted the card back to *Change*.

“What’ve you got there?” asked Varric.

“Something ominous,” said Lavellan and pocketed it.

They kept going. The Nightmare continued taunting the lot of them on the way and it either strengthened their conviction or channelled their anger towards it because everybody here was just sick of this shit. But Lavellan could tell, somehow, that while the Nightmare was growing stronger, it was also growing more frantic as Lavellan's group advanced.

They reunited with Divine Justinia. She stared out at the demons ahead of them.

“The Nightmare is closer now,” she said. “It knows you seek escape. With each moment, it grows stronger. More of your memories are scattered here.”

“Then let’s continue to be ill-mannered guests,” said Lavellan and descended upon the demons.

Once taken care of, he regathered his memories once more. It was as before. Justinia reached her hand out for him as he climbed an impossibly vertical staircase which may as well have been a textured wall, the spiderlings close behind. She grabbed and pulled him up.

This time, though, Lavellan made sure Justinia was in front as they ran.

“Keep running!” he urged, looked over his shoulder.

The Nightmare demon bore down upon them. Too many eyes, pocks across the carapace of its colossal arachnid body.

“Where do you think you’re going?” it bellowed. “What terrible guests you are.”

One of the spiderlings caught Lavellan’s leg and he staggered.

“No!” Justinia cried and ran back for him.

He waved his hands at her. “Get to the rift, don’t worry about me!” He slashed at the spiderling and severed its legs off him. Lavellan stared up at the Nightmare’s many eyes, its jaws opening and closing as its teeth undulated. It reached for him.

Justinia shoved him out of the way. The Nightmare’s grip closed around her instead.

“No!”

Lavellan reached, brushed against her hand—

“Go,” she whispered.

The Nightmare dragged her away with a discordant cackle.

Lavellan roared in frustrated anguish at the expanse of the Fade. He slashed at the spiders closest to him in his fury, turned and ran for the rift.

Their vision flooded with white as he passed through the rift and they returned to the present. Lavellan clutched at his head. The stirrings of a headache pressed at his cranium as the emotions flooded into him, the feeling of *wrongness* exacerbating his current one as memory and reality overlaid. It seemed he’d felt like shit in the Fade then, too. But why?

He shook it off and looked at the Divine, crestfallen.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I tried.”

Her eyes saddened. “I know. Thank you.”

Divine Justinia closed her eyes and she shed her corporeal form, blinded them all with the transformation as the spirit shone through. When they opened their eyes, a golden spirit hovered over them, having taken on the rough silhouette of the Divine, all the way to the Chantry hat she’d worn. Filaments of light drifted in the halo of her radiance.

And Lavellan could *feel* it. Felt what the spirit was embodying.

“You’re a spirit of Faith,” he said.

She looked upon him, but he could no longer see her face to determine her thoughts.

“If that is the story you wish to tell, it is not a bad one.”

“But it isn’t a story, is it? You *are* Faith.”

“Either way,” said Hawke. “What we do know is that the mortal Divine perished at the Temple.” She narrowed her eyes at Stroud. “Thanks to the Grey Wardens.”

Stroud scowled back and they erupted into an argument about the Wardens. Lavellan’s headache throbbed and he pinched the bridge of his nose. Faith hovered, patient, waiting.

“Creators, could all of you please *shut up*,” he snapped.

The calm he’d earned from easing the fears of the dreamers had dissipated and he was back to enduring the shattering needles. Lavellan pressed the heel of his hands against his eyes. The argument trailed away. He bit the inside of his cheek and reined in his whimpers.

“Arguing isn’t helping,” he said, forced his voice out despite the overwhelming need to bury his fingernails into the first layer of his skin and shred it off. “We can all yell at each when we’re not being threatened by a literal embodiment of fear.”

Shrill shrieks rent the air.

Spiderlings descended upon them along with more fearlings. Lavellan tore his gaze away from the dead Cassandras.

“The Nightmare has found us,” said Faith. She rose and disappeared in a shower of golden light.

“No shit, really?” grumbled Bull.

Stroud and Hawke looked at each other, then nodded. A truce. They situated themselves beside Lavellan and his companions fell into position.

“Take care of the minor fears, please,” he said. “I’m sorry—”

“They’re just a bunch of spiders,” grunted Hawke. “I can take care of them.”

“Maggots are nothing,” agreed Cassandra.

Lavellan gave them a grateful nod and focused on the spiderlings instead. Once they’d dispatched of the Nightmare’s minions, they followed the faint, golden trail of light that Faith had left behind for them to follow. The time constraint finally kicked into everyone. They raced, either weary of the Fade or itching to serve the Nightmare’s ass to itself or both. Lavellan was both.

What if he wouldn’t feel normal again outside the Fade? What if he was stuck like this, forever feeling wrong, torn inside and reassembled outside?

“Do you think you can fight me? I am your every fear come to life!” the Nightmare roared.

They found Faith hovering in front of a shimmering, green barrier.

“I am the veiled hand of Corypheus himself!” continued the Nightmare. “The demon army you fear? I command it. They are bound all through me!”

“Ah, so if we banish you, we banish the demons?” asked Faith. “Thank you, Every Fear Come to Life.”

The Nightmare yelled in frustration. More spiderlings crawled out from seemingly nowhere or out of the the crevices in the stone and fragments of walls. They focused on Faith.

“I will bring this barrier down,” she said, “but that means I cannot fend off the Nightmare’s

minions.”

They kept the spiderlings off her until she shattered the barrier. She vanished again, left no trails this time, but the path seemed straightforward enough so they pushed on.

Until they faced a fork in the path.

Oh.

“Right or left?” he asked.

Hawke took out a coin. “Left, tails,” she said and flipped it. The coin landed heads. “Right then.”

Varric laughed in disbelief. “Wait, wait, are you two really deciding to navigate the Fade by chance?”

“When the choice is demons or demons, sometimes you just want to feel as if you have some say over your life careening out of control,” said Lavellan. They took the right path and descended the stairs to a barren field littered with large puddles of water and pillars of stone. A mimicry of the sea and shore stretched beside them.

“Wow, water,” drawled Hawke. “I’m terrified of wet socks, how’d it know?”

Lavellan felt the call of another soul standing hunched over a table scattered with papers. Lavellan approached, offered his hand, and they reached back.

They were one of the first Wardens, the first to answer the call to take up arms against the darkspawn. A Scholar at heart, fraught with despair. The darkspawn were made of void and even death refused their presence. What could kill these creatures of decay?

Lavellan already knew the answer and he needn’t search far.

Show me the blood of the darkspawn, he willed the Fade and on the shores of the false sea, a glint caught his eye. He dug out the vial of darkspawn blood from the bone-white sands and returned to the Scholar, placing the vial on the table.

“A way to defeat the Archdemon,” he said.

The soul surged towards the vial and the papers scattered in the wake of its force. It passed on with a blinding pulse of light. The vial now sat empty.

Lavellan was back to feeling some semblance of normal.

They arrived at the graveyard, their darkest fears as the epitaphs on the tombstones. Everyone stared in silence at theirs, unsure of how to respond.

His had changed. While before, it had read: *Failure*, now it read...

Lavellan frowned at his tombstone.

Lavellan

Lost himself

Was it meant to sting even more that it hadn’t used his first name? Not the Nightmare’s most impressive attempt.

Solas stood vigil over his, gripping his staff tight. *Dying alone*, his tombstone read. Lavellan understood now that it may have meant something deeper. Alone, but also *alone*. The last of the People. Or alone in his actions. Perhaps all of them at once.

“Great bonding experience everyone,” said Bull.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Lavellan and turned away. This was a dead-end path anyway.

They retraced their steps and took the left path at the fork, fought two hulking Pride demons, encountered a dormant eluvian, before Lavellan felt the pull of another fearful soul resting upon a tattered bed in the corner. This one seemed smaller than the rest.

He reached for it and no, no, this was a child, a Little Girl who'd stilled her cries to ease her mother's worries. A Little Girl who'd wanted so desperately to be freed of the monsters in her sleep. Fevered. Faded.

Ser Snort had kept the monsters away.

He searched, found a dirtied stuffed animal on a ledge, and hurried to return it to the little girl. The soul took it, enveloped it with light.

“It’s alright now,” he said, let his voice carry and soothe. “Ser Snort is here. He’ll protect you from the monsters. Let him lead the way.” The soul trembled. He sat on the edge of the bed and let the child rest on him, humming his mother’s lullaby to her until the trembling stopped and she drifted away like a mist cleared by the rising heat of the morning. More calm surrounded him. Lavellan didn’t want to tear his skin out any longer.

And on his lap remained a figurine of Ser Snort. A little, pink nug. He looked up and met the varied expressions on his companion’s faces.

“A child,” he explained and looked down, stroking the small item in his hand, and pocketed it.

They continued and the paths became straightforward once more, made livelier by the occasional waterfall of blood. They reunited with Faith, who was hovering in front of another green barrier. Rather than spiderlings and fearlings, demons arrived to deter them.

Three Despair demons shrieked while wraiths and Rage demons trawled through. Oh balls.

Still, demons were fine. Demons he could handle.

Three Pride demons plus two Despair demons soon appeared to make their lives hell.

Oh fuck *off*.

Lavellan was forced to use three flasks. Three left. One of each.

The fight harrowed them, wore them down. Lavellan lost himself in the rhythm of the fight and did his best to remain in it otherwise he would lose. He had to be a storm. One flash of lightning after another.

Once they'd vanquished the demons, Faith shattered the barrier.

She didn’t vanish this time. Instead, she hovered ahead as they trailed behind her through the winding paths of the Fade. They entered a large tunnel and there, tucked to the side, were the five souls Lavellan had helped. He felt their call and approached. They bowed their heads and he

mirrored the gesture.

The souls twisted around one another, formed a hurricane of light, then winked out with a rushing sigh and left behind something gleaming. Lavellan crouched and picked it up.

It was a small, teardrop-shaped necklace. The crystal glimmered like the sliver of a star in his hand, small and delicate, barely bigger than his thumbnail.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A gift,” replied Faith. She sounded pleased. “Highly potent spiritual energy resides within.”

Maybe he could ask Dagna to have a look at it. He pocketed it. His pocket was getting full at this rate.

“In any case Inquisitor,” said Faith, “beyond this tunnel is the rift. You must get through and slam it shut with all your strength. That will banish the army of demons and exile this cursed creature to the furthest reaches of the Fade.”

His group moved through the tunnel and left it, found themselves beneath the emerald skies of the Fade once more.

And there, guarding the rift, was the colossal arachnid with the pocks of holes and eyes on its carapace, jaws snapping, teeth undulating.

The Nightmare.

“Maker, that’s massive,” breathed Hawke.

“That is one disgusting motherfucker,” said Bull.

“How in Shartan’s sagging nutsack are we supposed to get past *that*?” asked Varric.

Nightmare had two bodies: the large arachnid with its eyes moving nauseatingly in their holes, and the variant of Fear demons that Lavellan would sometimes encounter around rifts in the corporeal world. The Aspect of Nightmare. That was more humanoid, more manageable. Spikes grew from its spines, reminiscent of spider legs, and it held no face, only a plated structure that tapered into two pairs of short tentacles.

What skin he could see was emaciated, yellowing, pulled taut over ribs.

“If you would,” said Faith as she rose towards the Nightmare's main body, “tell Leliana, ‘I am sorry. I failed you too.’”

Her glow brightened until she was almost blinding. Lavellan shielded his eyes with his arm and he squinted. Lightning spread from Faith, speared the Aspect of Nightmare with it, and the Nightmare collapsed in a convulsion of golden light.

Faith erupted in a glorious blast of radiance that showered them all with warmth. The Nightmare shrieked.

When the light dwindled, Faith and the large arachnid Nightmare were gone, but the Aspect of Nightmare recovered, screeched at them.

The rift flickered behind the Aspect, a lazy drift of green.

"Let's go home, shall we?" asked Lavellan.

They rushed into the fight.

Their ranged fighters had to focus on attacks because their close-quarter combatants couldn't gain ground. The Aspect would keep disappearing in a cloud of shadows and reappear elsewhere.

Spiderlings joined the chaos. Lavellan kicked them off him and kept his focus on the Aspect. He unslung his bow, positioned himself, and shot, but a barrier shimmered around the Aspect and deflected his arrows. He picked off the spiderlings sneaking up behind his companions instead.

"Hawke and Bull," he called out. "On the Nightmare! Hit hard, wear the barrier down. Rest of you, keep the spiders off them."

Then came the Terrors.

Lavellan strung together an impressive length of curses.

He sundered the Veil and paralysed the Nightmare and Terror demons.

"Hit them! Now, while I hold them there!"

He managed to hold the sunder open for five seconds before the fire in his veins began. Everyone focused their attacks onto the three demons. Lavellan's hands shook after ten seconds.

"Alright, now move out of the way!"

The pain in his hand swelled. Lavellan closed the sunder.

The Aspect roared once the sunder closed, sent out a blast of energy that knocked Lavellan back, jarring his teeth.

He groaned and staggered back up.

A Terror demon sprang from beneath him and knocked him down again. It slashed.

He rolled away but the demon's claws caught on his pants and sliced down his thigh. Son of a bitch.

Varric shot at the Terror. His bolt exploded on contact and the Terror screeched, vanishing into fragments of energy.

"You cannot stand against me," said the Aspect and disappeared in shadow once again. It reappeared behind Varric. "I will crush you like the ants you are!"

"Varric!" screamed Hawke.

"Shit!" said Varric but no, no, he wouldn't make it—

The Aspect slammed its two arms and many limbs down.

Cassandra lunged and came between them with her shield held over their heads. The Aspect struck the shield. The metal of it crumpled and Cassandra's arm jerked back at an unnatural angle.

Bile lurched up Lavellan's throat and his legs wouldn't *move*, come *on*!

She fell to her knees with a cry and Varric aimed Bianca at the Aspect, shot point blank into its neck. It screeched and retreated. Cassandra's arm dangled limply by her side, shield still in hand. She clenched her teeth and shoved it back into place with a pained cry that morphed into a determined roar and she was back on her feet.

Lavellan forced himself to stand, ignored the burn racing up his leg. He left his bow on the ground and drew his daggers.

He launched himself at the Aspect once it flickered back from the shadows and smashed the flask of lightning against himself. His only flask of lightning. His pain dulled and his senses alerted. He wove around the Aspect, inflicted and injured, made the most of the short window of time he had.

It shrieked and imparted a few hits on Lavellan but it couldn't keep up with his speed. Black tar leaked from its numerous wounds.

His flask wore off. Lavellan staggered as he fell from its high, sharp heat shooting up from his injured leg.

The Aspect surged towards him.

Stroud yanked Lavellan back — rushed and bashed his shield against the Aspect while Cassandra attacked. A Rage demon reared up behind her but another of Varric's specialised bolts felled it.

Lavellan's leg gave out. Solas caught him, let Lavellan lean on him.

"Don't worry about me," Lavellan grunted.

"A little difficult to do," was his curt reply as he swung his staff with one arm. Lavellan fixed his position and tried to put less weight on Solas so he could cast properly. "I have been saving my mana for something large. Will you help me with it?"

"What do you need?"

"I need the enemies gathered in one place."

Lavellan shook his hand out and took a deep breath.

"Move away from it!" he ordered again and opened another sunder above the Aspect. Scorching pain erupted and corroded to his elbows. His grip around Solas tightened and his breathing turned laboured.

"Quickly!" urged Solas. "Herd the rest to the sunder!"

They set to work. Cassandra and Stroud rammed into enemies and swept them towards the sunder while Bull shouldered others. Hawke bashed spiderlings and launched them with a swing of her staff. They were immediately eviscerated by the sunder. It was almost comical. He would laugh if he wasn't in damn pain.

"Move back!" said Solas. He held his staff overhead and orange wisps of light spun beneath him, reminiscent of flames. Solas slammed the staff down on the ground.

A large magic circle glowed beneath the cluster. Stone and fire rained from the skies.

Lavellan grimaced as green veins of lightning spread from his hands, pain sharp and throbbing.

"Just a little longer, lethallin," said Solas, slightly out of breath. He secured his hold around

Lavellan.

Solas' firestorm battered the enemies while the sunder held them in place, helpless against the barrage. Each hit thundered as the rocks splintered and the fire raged and the black trails of smoke laced with green lightning from the sunder.

"Holy shit," crowed Bull with a disbelieving cackle.

After the last of the meteors fell, Hawke swiftly summoned spikes of ice. They jutted from the ground, jagged and mean, impaled the Aspect's unmoving body and displayed it as if it were a head on a pike. Black blood seeped into the crystalline ice.

They took a moment to regain their breaths. Solas gently lowered Lavellan into a sitting position and attempted to heal him, but his magic spluttered, mana exhausted. He tore a strip off his coat and wrapped it around Lavellan's leg instead. Lavellan thanked Solas and took stock of his companions. They were all in varying states of bloodied or bruised. Cassandra held her shield arm awkwardly.

"It is done," panted Stroud. "The demon is vanquished."

"Let's get the hell out of here," said Hawke.

But this wasn't over. They didn't have much time. Solas helped him up and he reached for the rift, opened it fully.

"Go!" Lavellan snapped.

They didn't need to be told twice. Solas lingered to help Lavellan walk but Lavellan waved him off and urged him to go ahead as he waited, making sure everyone was ahead of him. He didn't want anybody lagging behind.

He didn't want to choose a life.

Wisps of shadows swirled above them. Stroud and Hawke paused, hesitated as it thickened.

Lavellan gritted his teeth against the pain of his legs and he sprinted.

The Nightmare's large arachnid body materialised. Lavellan shoved Hawke and Stroud and apologised as they crashed harshly ahead of him.

"Get up, get up!" he ordered. "Run, you shits!"

"Inquisitor—" started Hawke.

"Go!"

The Nightmare demon bore down on Lavellan and blocked the path, but this time, no Hawke or Stroud. He tilted his chin up at the demon in defiance. His heart battered his ribs.

Fuck, fuck, now what?

"You think you are safe?" boomed the Nightmare's voice. "Fool!"

He couldn't die yet, not here!

"Inquisitor!"

The universe really, *really* despised him.

Solas rushed back for him and slid through the small gap beneath the Nightmare's legs.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lavellan yelled.

"What am I doing? What are *you* doing? Now is not the time for martyrdom!"

"Inquisitor! Solas!" cried Cassandra from the rift, voice and expression distraught. Lavellan met her panicked look and mustered a reassuring smile for her.

"I'll be back," he said, and turned to Solas. "Push her in," he murmured, chest tightening.

Solas pressed his lips into a grim line and shot a harmless force at her. Cassandra protested but it was silenced as Solas' magic pushed her into the rift.

Lavellan closed it.

"No!" shrieked the Nightmare. "What have you done? You have doomed us all!"

Lavellan grabbed Solas. Turned.

Ran.

Chapter End Notes

Me @ me: hey, action scenes aren't really your strong suit so maybe you shouldn't--

Me in a black hood: Do it

Me: But--

Me in a black hood: Juggle multiple characters while doing it, get fucked

Good job Lavellan, you saved Hawke and Stroud! Except, now you and Solas are stranded.

Side note, this fic is turning out to be a bigger project than I'd initially thought. I thought this fic would end in the 200k range but apparently, Plot and Lore Expansion happened. (Edit from future me, currently 460k words in: hahahahahahaa dumbass)

In echoes of the ancient chorus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

crescendo within your solace—

The impact from running sent a gutting burn through his thighs, coupling with the pain in his left forearm. Adrenaline was the only thing stopping him from collapsing.

“The Nightmare demon is being banished to the farthest Fade,” said Solas as they ran. “Its realm is fixed and thus, cannot continue. It will collapse around us and revert to its natural state without the demon’s influence.”

The large of crops of stone hovering in the sky rumbled, shook, fell. They hurtled into walls, devastated the earth, sent water splashing. One smashed into the Nightmare demon. It crashed with a screech, its many legs flailing, many eyes frantic.

They had to get out of here.

Lavellan looked down at his hands flaring with green.

This was going to hurt.

“Solas, what are the chances of a rift leading back to Adamant?” he asked.

“This realm is overlaid over the fortress so the space may roughly match. Why—” He paused, narrowed his eyes at Lavellan. “Please tell me you’re not planning to open a rift.”

“I’m not planning to open a rift.” Lavellan clenched his hand. “I’m *making* one.”

They passed through the tunnel from earlier. It collapsed behind them just as they exited it, but the large, twin raven statues toppled ahead of them and blocked the path.

Trapped.

“Well, now we *really* don’t have a choice,” muttered Lavellan. “Alright, hold on.”

He stopped running and reached for the Veil, felt its vibration, its hum beneath his hand. Solas threw a static barrier up around them and repelled the small rocks falling from the sky.

Lavellan breathed, focused. It had to be larger than a sunder. A clean rip in the Veil, not a punch. He'd done it before when he'd sent Corypheus to the Fade, but he'd done that messily so it would rip Corypheus apart. He had to be careful this time. Clean. He had to part the curtain, find the seam and tear.

He could do it. Had to. Otherwise they would die with this realm,

The Anchor latched itself onto the Veil. Lavellan scrunched his brows in concentration and pinched the Veil from either side. Stretched.

Ripped.

Opened.

A nebulous cloud of green shimmered around them and a vigorous ripple of agony ravaged his arm. Lavellan gnashed his teeth and swallowed his cry. He gripped his elbow to steady the tremor of his hand and forced the small tear to open further. The green glow flared over his forearms.

A small earthquake shook them.

Lavellan staggered but Solas caught him and lowered themselves into a kneeling position. He laid his hand over Lavellan's. Coolness seeped into Lavellan's skin from Solas' magic and the pain eased somewhat.

"Focus," said Solas. "Be swift. Tear it in one."

The world fell around them.

Lavellan took a deep breath and fixed his grip on the Veil, on the forming rift, and forced it open. He screamed. His arm burned, felt as if a hot iron rod had lodged itself in the space between the two bones of his forearm. Veins of lightning spread over his skin.

Oh gods, oh gods, his arm was going to disintegrate—

A rift yawned in front of them, displayed a tantalising array of unfeasible colours. Lavellan panted, too harrowed to speak, throat raw.

Solas slipped his arms under Lavellan's and pulled him up, hobbled towards the rift.

A large chunk of rock loomed and hurtled towards them. Lavellan paled. With a great heave, he threw themselves into the rift in time to avoid being crushed.

Light flooded his vision.

Lavellan flinched and Solas' hold on him loosened and they plunged, hands seeking one another as the darkness eclipsed the light. They couldn't hold on to each other. The loss of his sight jarred him and he cast his hands out, yelled Solas' name, but no sound escaped.

Fingers brushed against his.

Ripped away.

Powerful gales ripped into him and separated him from Solas. In the darkness, he tumbled. Alone, lost, bereft.

Landed—

Awoke to the world in flames.

His lungs filled with decay and the smell of burnt bodies, the dark sky thick with smog and embers. Lavellan coughed and sat up. Taste of metal in his mouth. His left forearm was made of light and agony. Black dust beneath him, stained his fingers like charcoal, stuck to it because of the browned blood.

Here was where the world had trembled, brought to its knees by the Dread Wolf, the board in a game of chess where powerful nations had arrayed and rent the board asunder. This was once a city. Now a city of ash and death, ruled by the march of armies and the blood of the fallen. There were no victors here.

This world was on its last throes of life.

He pushed himself up, covered in soot and aches and dried, crusting blood. On his last throes of life too. His left arm flickered — light, not flesh. He tilted his head skyward and mourned that he wouldn't be able to see blue skies in his final moments. Faded and indiscernible memories flitted through his mind. He mourned them too.

Lavellan turned.

Solas stood across him, held himself in a fatigued manner, the wolf pelt across his chest matted with blood.

They shared a long, grieving look.

"I am tired," he said. Who said? Both. Neither.

In the distance: screaming, weeping, the ringing of metal, the rallying cries of dying soldiers. Did it matter which side they were on? Not really. Death, death, death. The breeze was humid.

He called on his wrath, his fury, but there was nothing left in him. No meaning.

"I don't want to fight," Lavellan said.

Solas reflected Lavellan's drained expression. "Nor I."

He smiled ruefully. "So let's not."

"You of all people know that cannot be."

Lavellan chanced a step forward, did so slowly and with care as one would when faced with a frightened animal.

"Why not?" he asked. "This isn't an either or. It shouldn't be. Please, just... Let me in."

Solas smiled, brittle, aching. "You cannot fix this."

"I'm not trying to, that's not my responsibility. But let me help." Lavellan took a step, and another, and another, until he and Solas were facing each other with the distance scant between them. "You don't have to be lonely; you don't have to walk alone. There's another path, there must be."

"There isn't."

Lavellan grabbed the front of the wolf pelt, felt cold blood beneath his hands. The Anchor lit the space between them.

"Then *make* one," he snarled.

"It cannot be as easy as that. We may wish and hope, but the reality is rarely as favourable."

"I didn't say it would be. Did you even think about it? Did you even bother? Did you even fight to contemplate it?"

“I tire of fighting.”

Lavellan’s expression fell, shoulders heavy as the realisation of it hit. As his weariness hit.

“So do I.” A pathetic and choked sob escaped him as he hung his head, let it rest on Solas’ shoulders. “So do I.”

Solas hesitated, but slowly, he brought his arms up and wrapped them around Lavellan. Loose at first. As if giving him room to escape. Lavellan wrapped his arms around Solas in return and Solas held him tighter then. They clung to one another on that shattered chess board, that ruined battlefield, witnessed only by the rubble and the cinders and the terrible, cloying air.

“You do not have to keep fighting,” murmured Solas. “Let me carry the burden on your behalf.”

Lavellan raised his head and frowned at him. “You cannot fight for both worlds, Solas. And you do not have to carry everything yourself.”

“Better me than you.”

Searing pain flared from Lavellan's back.

A choked, wet gurgle escaped him and his body seized at the intrusion.

“Solas—” he gasped. His fingers gripped the wolf pelt and squeezed cold blood out, clammy through his fingers, trickled down his inner arm like a lover’s caress.

“I’m sorry,” Solas whispered, eyes ever so remorseful as he cradled the back of Lavellan's head.

He wrenched the blade.

A strangled sound tore through Lavellan’s throat, lungs filling with blood. Solas’ expression twisted in grief. They shared a broken, quiet look.

Lavellan wanted to feel rage, anger, anything. Anything but crushing grief. Anything but gutting betrayal. Lavellan’s breaths rattled and his legs buckled beneath him, clutched at the back of Solas’ armour just to pull himself up. Solas held him steady. The hand at the back of Lavellan’s head moved to cup his cheek instead.

“Vhenan,” Lavellan choked out, looked into his eyes imploringly, hand desperate as it gripped the one Solas had laid upon his cheek. Solas’ expression twisted even further. “Don’t—”

The rest of his words died on his tongue as Solas pressed their lips together and Lavellan’s world came crashing even faster. Tasted salt and ash and metal. Lavellan scrunched his eyes shut and his world reduced to three things: the sorrow-tainted kiss, the dull fire in his back, and wherever he and Solas were touching. It couldn’t be tender. It wasn’t allowed to be.

Blood slipped through teeth and mixed with tears with every slide and brush of their lips. Someone sobbed into the kiss. It didn’t matter who.

Somebody pulled back. Again, it didn’t matter who. Nothing mattered anymore.

Lavellan gasped in the scarce breaths they were sharing, as if he could steal the air in Solas’ lungs and fight the death he'd wrought Lavellan. Meagre attempts to hold onto life.

One last time, Solas whispered, “Ir abelas, vhenan,” over bloodstained, tear-soaked lips.

Solas pulled the blade out, tore another rattling breath out of Lavellan.

And he let Lavellan go.

Without Solas to hold him up, he staggered back, taking in pathetic, gasping breaths as if that would help. Coldness gaped in the space between them.

He fell.

The last thing Lavellan saw was the smoky, ruined sky before the waters swallowed him. His blood diffused, crimson ribbons trailing up and blending into the darkness of the water, his arm a soft flicker of light reaching nothing.

And all Lavellan did was float.

Lost and alone. The light of the Anchor faded and the dark draped itself around him.

His greatest declaration of love would see you dead.

Lavellan closed his eyes.

Sunlight through his eyelids.

Sunlight on his face. Warm.

Birdsong trilled and the breeze chimed soft, caressed his cheek and eased his eyes open. Blue skies stretched above. Lavellan blinked, turned his head, the grass soft beneath him and tickling his ears. Found himself in a garden. A garden?

Lavellan pushed himself up. No pain from a stab wound, no struggling breaths, his left arm was back to normal.

No tears and blood on his lips.

Lavellan buried his head in his hands and sucked in a shaky breath. What was that? A dream? No, that wasn't... That wasn't how it had happened. That wasn't how they'd died. Their death had been hostile, violent, hopeless, and without room left for actions of love. None besides delivering the other's end.

He rose his head and forced himself to stand.

This garden... Lavellan knew this garden.

He recognised the ancient elven architecture of the covered walkway framing the garden, the golden tiles of the garden path, the vibrant and picturesque asters and the leaves chiming with every soft breeze. Almost tasted the magic in the air. It shimmered over his skin, clung to the fabric of his clothes, swept into his lungs like smoke — the ghost of a forgotten time.

His gaze fell on the stone gazebo.

“Oh,” he breathed.

This was Skyhold.

This was Elvhenan.

Lavellan took a tentative step forward, then another. The world remained solid. He wandered to the walkway, traced his hand over the stone, before he entered the Great Hall.

The atmospheric shift punched him in the gut.

Vaulted ceilings gleamed with embedded crystals glowing in the crushing din, the elevated path in the middle made of dark, polished stones veined with gold. Weak Veilfire flickered in their brackets, the firelight glinting off the mosaic inlaid upon the walls.

Eerie.

The press of discomfort sat heavy on his shoulders and his footsteps echoed in the space and it felt too empty, wide, and open and unwelcoming and distant. Those weren't the words he would have associated with the Great Hall. It was where the braziers would always be lit, where people would gather to take shelter from the cold or speak with one another, where people would mill about and where Lavellan would have dinner with friends or soldiers or dignitaries. It was warm. It was the heart of Skyhold. Even in the dead of the night when everyone had gone to bed, he'd feel the warmth as he walked through the Hall.

Here, it was... cold, actively discouraging anybody who wished to roam it.

Lavellan's gaze fell at the end of the Hall where the throne usually resided.

There was no throne.

He stared at the empty space for a long time. Nothing had replaced it. No altars or shrines or statues or even decoration. It was as if the empty space itself *was* the throne, was the declaration, and Lavellan wasn't sure what Solas was declaring by leaving it bare. But he could infer.

He examined his surroundings once more.

Go away, it seemed to say. *There is no god here.*

His mouth twisted and pulled. Well, mission accomplished, he wanted to fuck off from here. But how could he leave? Where even was he?

His stomach churned. What if... No, he couldn't be in the past, could he? If he'd been brought back from the dead into the past, why couldn't it happen again? And further back? What if the forces which had brought him back in the first place decided he was ineffective in that time and sent him thousands of years back instead?

Solas. He had to find Solas.

Lavellan searched high and low, ignored the sinister press of the quiet and emptiness. After he scoured the upper and lower levels of the Great Hall, he sighed and resigned himself to heading to the Keep and ascending its many flights of stairs.

He reoriented himself on the way. They'd been in the Fade. They'd fought Nightmare's Aspect, had closed the rift to Adamant after ensuring everybody had gotten through, he and Solas had escaped the Nightmare's collapsing realm by opening a rift, and then...

He traced his fingers over the crystal filigrees twined with the stone wall.

And then the end of the world as Solas stabbed him in the back.

Now here.

Another set of footsteps echoed besides his. A hopeful breath left him. Solas?

He hurried down the wide corridor, followed it left, turned the corner.

Froze.

His legs numbed, his throat seized, and Lavellan met Fen'Harel's surprised gaze. Fen'Harel, who was garbed in armour, mantle made of a wolf's pelt. Fen'Harel, whose gaze narrowed in suspicion at him.

He couldn't move a single damned muscle.

"One of Dirthamen's?" Fen'Harel asked in Elvish. Lavellan startled at his voice, then cursed himself for the reaction.

One of Dirthamen's? What did he—?

The vallaslin.

Slave markings.

Lavellan tried to move or flee, but his body wouldn't listen. Any orders he sent to his limbs were blocked and all he could do was quiver in place. He opened his mouth but no sound escaped.

All he managed was a weak, "Fen'Harel."

Fen'Harel's eyes widened. "You are hurt," he said.

Lavellan looked down at himself. He was battered, bleeding from the gash in his thigh, scraped and bruised from fighting the Aspect.

"Oh," he mumbled. His leg flared in pain and buckled and Lavellan pitched forward.

Fen'Harel Fade-stepped and caught him, lowered them both onto the floor while Lavellan clutched onto him for dear life, couldn't decipher the furore of emotions battling within him. Last time he'd clung onto Solas like this, he'd been stabbed in the back. How many times could a man get stabbed before he considered the stabber a lost cause? Or had that even been Solas? Was his mind playing tricks? Was the Fade playing tricks? Could these visions be the work of a demon?

"Who did this to you?" Fen'Harel demanded, hovered his glowing hands over the wound, but it wouldn't close. "What manner of injury is this?" he muttered to himself.

Lavellan observed him. *Was* this Fen'Harel his Solas? He consulted the Well but it was silent — hushed roar of waves upon a shore.

Fuck, he was so lost.

"Do you know me?" he finally managed to ask after wrestling his vocal cords into action. The ancient language settled on his tongue. Fen'Harel looked up and Lavellan choked up at the familiar hue of his eyes.

“No, my apologies,” he said, but he frowned and scrutinised Lavellan. “But you do seem familiar. I—” The frown deepened. “I cannot feel anything from you.”

Feel?

Something frantic descended upon Fen'Harel's expression.

“Who is your master?” he asked. Shit, he thought Lavellan was a slave. At Lavellan's silence, he eased and continued in a softer tone. “Do not be afraid, I am here to help. Who did this to you?”

His mind whirled, casting for answers.

“I... I can't say,” he said instead.

“You can say anything. You are safe here. Tell me, who hurt you?”

Lavellan looked into those eyes full of fervour and a desire to right oppression, to break the chains of bondage. Not exhausted. Not burdened with grief and regret brought on by mistakes of a race-ending magnitude. Among Lavellan's warring emotions, resentment and sorrow won.

The pressure building in his throat escaped him in a choked wheeze. Hot tears brimmed and fell, felt as if they'd carved a channel into his cheeks, and his body shuddered under the force of his weeping.

“You did,” Lavellan whispered shakily.

“I—”

Lavellan glared him into silence, a mighty feat considering he was a hiccupping mess. The resentment and bitterness reared their unsightly heads.

“No,” he hissed. “*I'm* talking. You sit there and listen.”

Fen'Harel blinked at him in bewilderment.

“You don't see us, do you? We're all just—” His shuddering breaths made it difficult to push words out but fuck it if he wouldn't try. Lavellan gripped the wolf pelt. “We're just *distractions* to you, things that can't become real because we'll interfere with your greater plans.”

“You *are* real,” he said, frowning, looking unsure if Lavellan needed a cloth to wipe his tears with or a good conk to the head.

Lavellan's laugh was almost manic. “No. Not just me. It can never just be me. It shouldn't ever just be me, Solas.”

Fen'Harel stilled at his name.

“Please, try,” he begged, hung his head, and succumbed to another wave of sobs. “I can't do this on my own. I don't want to do it on my own. Not again.”

And it was his fault that he'd ended up so alone. Lavellan had pushed everyone's attempts to forge a deeper connection away while he was Inquisitor, and then he'd been too embroiled in anger while hunting Solas down. Any meaningful connections he'd made were all near the end of his life when exhaustion had dulled the spokes of his rage and removed whatever was making him decline his friends' attempts to spend time with him.

“You don’t have to,” Lavellan continued. “You don’t have to be so alone. We’re here. We’re real. Let us be real.”

Fen’Harel listened, grew more troubled by the second. He reached out and cradled Lavellan’s face. The warmth of his hands had Lavellan sobbing anew. He gave in to his weakness and closed his eyes, leaned into the touch. Fen’Harel swiped his thumb beneath Lavellan’s eye and wiped the tears away.

“Why do you weep?” he asked.

Lavellan held the hands cradling his face.

“We aren’t shadows,” he said. “We’re trying. Please, give us a chance.”

Fen’Harel stayed quiet. Lavellan opened his eyes and met the vulnerability in Fen’Harel’s gaze.

“You’re... familiar,” Fen’Harel said. “I know you.” His gaze traced the lines of Lavellan’s face, fingers trailing and catching on the edge of Lavellan’s jaw as if he were mapping it out.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“I am. I am always listening to you,” he said with an earnestness that surprised them both. “Who are you to me?”

“I can’t answer that for you. Who *am* I to you?”

Fen’Harel leaned his forehead against Lavellan’s. “You make my heart hurt so.” He took one of Lavellan’s hands and guided it to his chest, over his heart. “I *know* you.”

“You do.” Lavellan felt the thunder of both their heartbeats. “Please, think about what I said.”

It was like watching the time-lapse of a blooming rose. Fen’Harel’s confusion melted, replaced by startled clarity as his lips parted and recognition sparked in his eyes. And the next, like watching the rose wilt. The youth and fire in his visage vanished and the resignation pulled his face into something exhausted, someone older, not any wiser.

“Why must you make things so much harder?” Fen’Harel asked, closed his eyes and furrowed his brows in mild distress. “I must do this.”

“No, it’s not the only way. There must be other ways.”

“I’m sorry.” Fen’Harel smiled sadly as he opened his eyes. “No visions, no matter how clever, will sway me.”

Lavellan wanted to punch him. He thought this was all a vision (and some part of him was relieved that they were not, in fact, in Elvhenan).

He grabbed the front of Solas’ cloak and shook him, snarled, his face blurry past the tears.

“Vision or no, open your ears you damn bastard! This isn’t like you. This isn’t you.”

“You do not know that,” he whispered.

“I do. Grief and guilt has twisted you. Spare a few moments to think of alternatives, please. Do not lose yourself to the monster that others think you are. You’re not a monster. I am sorry the Dalish have made one out of you, I am sorry that history has not been kind to you, I am sorry that things

have gone so wrong with you trying to do the right thing. But please. Please, keep trying. Not like this. Not the path of death.”

His eyes widened. “I—”

Lavellan’s left hand flared. The green flashes intensified, lit the corridor and washed everything away. Lavellan squinted. And again, the light gave way to darkness.

Water wrapped around him, pushed.

Lavellan reached in the darkness. Upwards—

He broke through the surface of the water with a gasp, pulled himself up onto shore and rolled over to lay on his back and catch his breath.

The Fade’s psychedelic skies and strident sun mocked him. They weren’t out.

Needles prickled at him once more. Lavellan breathed in a quivering gasp and pressed the heel of his palms to his eyes, whimpered. It didn’t work. And now he had those wretched visions to remember and he was back to feeling pressed yet pulled in every direction.

Wait. Where was Solas?

Lavellan sat up and absorbed his surroundings, ignored his disorientation. Water everywhere, deep pools with only narrow paths to navigate them, reminiscent of the Fallow Mire minus the walking corpses, with an addition of waterfalls rushing skywards. So they were water...rises?

The Black City hovered in the distance.

“Solas?” he called out.

Silence.

Lavellan pushed himself up. His leg protested at the sudden action and he stumbled. He unwrapped the strip of cloth to check on the wound and hissed at it. It throbbed, red and raised. The water had washed the blood away but it had reopened at some point so he rewrapped it. He pushed himself up and wandered the strange realm, conducted his search in silence because he had no wish to draw the attention of something unwanted.

Where the hell was Solas? And where in the Fade were they? It couldn’t be the Nightmare’s realm since that had collapsed, so then, which spirit or demon held dominion over this section of the Fade?

Could Solas be in the water? That was where Lavellan had crawled out of, after all, and he was sure he would have seen Solas on the paths.

A hand flailed in the waters beside him.

Lavellan yelped.

Solas surfaced, gasping. Lavellan got over his initial shock and grabbed his hand, pulled him out

and onto dry ground. Solas panted, looked at Lavellan as if he were a ghost.

“Mahanon?” he asked, voice small, the grip of his hands around Lavellan’s arms tightening to the point of hurting, but Lavellan made no mention of it.

“I’m here,” said Lavellan.

Solas looked around him, breathing ragged. He was pallid and almost sickly in the green light of the Fade, and the twinge of vicious satisfaction at his state had Lavellan feeling more shit than he already was. Still, he couldn’t help but indulge in it for a few seconds. *It’s about time you were unmoored. It’s about time you were the one clinging onto me for dear life, shattered and threadbare. It’s about time, it’s about time.*

It didn’t make him feel better.

Solas closed his eyes. Lavellan waited while he focused on his breathing, the unsteady and shaky breaths evening out into a steadier rhythm. The distressed lines on Solas’ face vanished. His shoulders relaxed.

Did Solas share Lavellan’s visions? Or were they separate?

Solas opened his eyes once more, calmer.

“Are you alright?” Lavellan asked as Solas uncurled his fingers and eased the deathly grip he had on Lavellan’s arm. His muscles were now sore from the dig of Solas’ fingers.

Solas sighed, rubbed his eyes. “No. I lost my staff.”

“Is that the sole reason why you’re not alright?”

He paused, frowned and glanced up at Lavellan. “No... Did you see visions?”

Lavellan played dumb. “Visions?” If they had indeed shared the visions, then he was going to have a hard time explaining why he’d babbled away about Solas’ plans. “What sort of visions?”

“I...” He shook his head. “No, never mind. In any case, the rift did not lead to Adamant. Now comes the problem of determining where we are and whether this part of the Fade belongs to a hostile spirit.”

“I’ve wandered for a while and I haven’t seen many spirits, if at all. It’s barren.”

Solas frowned and studied the realm. “Were you in the water, Inquisitor?”

Oh, back to Inquisitor it seemed.

“I was.”

“Are you sure you saw no visions?”

Lavellan supposed he could be somewhat truthful. “I didn’t say I didn’t. One was a memory though it wasn’t as I remember. Another was... Well, it featured people from my past, but the setting was somewhere I’d never been to before.”

“Nothing which tempted you?”

“No.”

“Were you shown your regrets?”

He hesitated at that, but he settled for shaking his head.

Something tightened in Solas’ expression. “Who did you meet?”

Lavellan looked down. “An old friend,” he murmured.

He stayed quiet and didn’t probe further, likely sensing the sorrow in Lavellan’s tone. Instead, his attention fell on Lavellan’s bandaged thigh and he was back to frowning.

“May I?” he asked and gestured at the wound.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to exhaust you. And you don’t have your staff.”

“I will not require it for this, and I have sufficiently regained my stores of mana.”

At Lavellan’s assenting nod, he unwrapped the bandage and set to work. Solas’ magic settled deep into his skin and Lavellan watched the wound close. The sight may have discomfited him were it any other time but as it was, he was far too drained.

“Should I try opening another rift?” he asked.

“No, not yet. Not until we determine the relative safety of this part of the Fade as compared to the rest.” He finished and offered Lavellan his hand. Lavellan took it and tested his leg, murmured his gratitude.

They navigated the paths, stuck in an uneasy silence with Lavellan feigning ignorance at the small looks Solas kept shooting him. Bastard had stabbed him *twice*. Did he do the last one on purpose? And he had the gall to kiss Lavellan afterwards. The absolute. Fucking. *Asshole*.

“These visions,” Lavellan started, “did you know you were in one? Were you in control of your actions?”

“Were you?” he returned.

“I didn’t know for one of them.”

Solas’ hands twitched by his sides. He looked bare without his staff to lean on or walk with, and after an awkward moment of deliberation, he settled for holding his hands behind his back and Lavellan could almost pretend they were conversing in a dream, walking through shifting paths of colour. Alas, the needles still in Lavellan’s bloodstream reminded him otherwise.

“I was not aware for either,” said Solas, tone terse and clipped. “Not until the end.”

Was Lavellan supposed to feel better that subconsciously, Solas thought the best course of action was to stab Lavellan as they embraced, literally stab him in the back, and then kiss him afterwards while he was bleeding out in his arms?

To be fair, he shouldn’t have expected much from the man who’d broken up with him in a cold, wet pond-cave in the dead of the night.

“What did you see?” Lavellan asked because the discomfort had made him irritable and petty and he wanted to *rip out his own skin and shave his teeth into thin layers and dig his nails into his throat—*

“I would rather not discuss it.”

“Okay,” he said, but his voice came out thin. Solas looked at him in question, but he was quick to shift to worry and Lavellan became aware of the minute aches in the muscles of his face and he realised his expression had turned strained at some point. The Well of Sorrows hissed. Whether that was directed at him, he didn’t know. He needed to... something. Burst or collapse inwards. Both, simultaneously.

“Are you alright?” Solas asked and stopped walking, reached out for Lavellan, but seemed to think better of it because his hands hesitated. He placed it on Lavellan’s arm instead. “Lethallin?”

His skin was too pulled, his ribs were too tight. The more he paid attention to the sensation, the worse it became, and the more he couldn’t ignore it which repeated the cycle until the discomfort grew exponentially and invaded every corner of his lucidity.

Lavellan gripped Solas’ shoulders to anchor himself. Couldn’t speak. The needles were bursting now, crystallising on the walls of his tissues.

Solas winced as Lavellan’s fingers dug into flesh, his skin saved from breaking because of his robes. “What has been ailing you? Did you feel the same when you and the Divine traversed the Fade?”

“Yes,” he nigh sobbed. “I just feel *wrong*.” The Anchor flared from his distress and Solas cast it a scrutinising look. He eased Lavellan’s left hand off his shoulders and covered it with his, the green light slipping through the spaces of their fingers.

It’s not the Anchor, he wanted to wail. It wasn’t that, he’d had it before and he’d been fine but now he was *not* and he couldn’t figure out why and it was driving him up against a wall. “I want to tear my skin apart and grind my teeth until they break and—” His words devolved into a frenzied stream of incoherent Elvish cursing.

“*Mahanon*,” Solas called firmly.

“I’m sorry,” he babbled, “I keep losing my shit in front of you and I’m being pathetic, I’m sorry—”

Solas opened his mouth, but something caught his attention over Lavellan’s shoulder. Soft, blue light flickered in Solas’ eyes. No, not in his eyes. Reflected off them.

Lavellan turned his head just as gentle curls of smoke coiled loosely around him, glowing a calm blue.

“*At ease*,” a voice whispered in his head. It wasn’t the Well of Sorrows. This voice swelled and lapped like water too, but it was a steady trickle over smooth stones rather than an unpredictable flooding. Unknown as it was, it still alleviated the wrongness. “*Stop pushing. You’ll hurt yourself.*”

The blue smoke pulled away, took the discomfort with it. Lavellan’s head cleared and he could finally breathe. The needles in his veins were still present but at least they were dismissible. The Anchor stopped flaring. Solas took his hands away and Lavellan eased the grip on his shoulders with a grimace and a meek apology. Pressing ahead and fighting despite his state of discomfort had sapped more of his strength than he’d realised.

Blue lights were still glowing behind him.

Lavellan turned to investigate the source and found a spirit hovering above the waters, glowing a deep, oceanic blue, radiant inwards and not outwards like Faith. The spirit was bright, but the light

was contained within its form.

“Hello,” said the spirit. Lavellan sensed it and what it represented.

“A spirit of Memory,” said Solas in faint surprise.

It drifted closer and stopped by the edge of the shore, gaze lingering on Lavellan, before nodding at Solas.

“Yes,” it said, its voice like a collection of nostalgic sighs and wistful farewells, swaying and shimmering, not quite how you remembered it.

“Memory?” asked Lavellan.

“They are rare and are generally content in the Fade, unconcerned with the strifes of our world,” Solas explained.

Lavellan tipped his head at Memory. “Were you the one who eased my discomfort?”

It nodded.

“Thank you,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m sorry, are we trespassing?”

“No,” it said, “but you mustn’t linger here. This is not where you are needed.” It looked into the water. “Some want to dismiss you dead, but you promised you will return, so she will wait. She believes. They believe. You will come back. The Fade Walker is with you, so they believe even more that you will both return.”

“Can you see them?” asked Lavellan.

“Their memories.”

“So it has already happened,” said Solas.

“Then we have to hurry back,” Lavellan said. A headache mounted in his head once more and he massaged his temples. “But how?”

“I can direct you back,” said Memory. “Open a rift once more and I will channel you to the fortress. However, I will require something in return.”

Solas and Lavellan shared a look.

“Uh, excuse us a moment,” said Lavellan and dragged Solas off to the side for a discussion. Once far enough, he leaned in and asked, “Can spirits of Memory do that? Can spirits do that at all?”

“If the spirit has significant power, yes, I believe so.” His gaze swept across the landscape. “In any case, this realm is large, and most spirits of Memory hold only small areas of the Fade. I believe this spirit to be ancient and powerful. They are not of malignant intentions either. Spirits of Memory rarely are, if at all. They are far more interested in preserving memories.”

Lavellan chewed on his lip. Well, their options were limited and he supposed he should be grateful that they were with a spirit of Memory and not a Desire or Pride demon.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll hear it out.”

They returned to Memory, who was hovering there in patience.

“We would welcome your help,” said Lavellan. “What do you need from us?”

Memory drifted back and left gentle ripples on the water’s surface in its wake. “The Nightmare stole memories from me, feasted upon the terror within them, and discarded them carelessly once it had finished with them. They are lost in its realm. Not its realm any longer. You have erased its touch upon that part of the Fade and so spirits will clamour to claim it for themselves. I fear the memories will be destroyed in the aftermath.”

“You want us to retrieve it?” Lavellan asked.

“Yes. Four memories it has taken. Recover what you can to the best of your abilities.” Memory looked east. “Its old realm is nearby. Our realms were not so close, initially, but it had grown fat upon the terror and had expanded its domain.”

“We’ll get moving then,” said Lavellan.

“Not you,” said Memory. “You will stay.”

He blinked at it. “Pardon?”

“You will remain. Only he will go.”

Lavellan would appreciate it if Solas at least looked like he was putting up a fight. All he did was tilt his head in consideration.

“Is there a reason why?” Solas asked.

“Faith guided through Nightmare’s domain, but without a guide, I fear he will become lost, even with you. He is capricious, easily distracted. The Fade changes far too easily with him.”

“Hey! I’m right here.”

“And I cannot leave my domain to guide. It will fall prey to those of the same opportunistic nature as the Nightmare. He must remain.”

Lavellan scowled. “I’m not leaving Solas alone. Not when you’ve told me all sorts of spirits will be vying for Nightmare’s old domain. I promise I won’t get distracted.”

“No,” said both. Lavellan scowled at Solas, but Solas wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“And Solas isn’t in danger of getting lost?” Lavellan asked.

“No. If the Fade were an ocean, then he walks the waters while you are within its depths. You are swimming well, but you are surrounded. It will be overwhelming.”

“I was doing just fine in the Nightmare’s realm.”

Memory fixed him an intense stare.

“Were you?” it challenged.

He became acutely aware of the needles in his veins once more, the press of the atmosphere and the push of his being, and he clenched his hands.

“If you stay,” said Memory, “I can also ensure the discomfort you feel does not exacerbate. Will that do?”

His body betrayed him by slumping in relief. Could a spirit look smug? Because Memory certainly looked smug.

“It will be alright, Inquisitor,” assured Solas. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I can take care of myself. The Fade is familiar to me. I have walked its paths numerous times.”

He was sure, but still. “It’s not your prowess I’m doubting,” Lavellan muttered. “I just worry.”

“I know. I’ll be back before you know it.” He glanced at Memory and they engaged in a silent conversation.

Memory tilted its head. “He will be alright,” said Memory. “My realm is safe so long as I remain.” It swept its arm out and a blue trail wisped into existence ahead of Solas. “I can guide you to my domain’s boundary, but from there, you are on your own.”

Solas nodded, gave Lavellan an almost chiding look. “Please, stay out of trouble.”

“Likewise.”

His lips twitched but Lavellan couldn’t be sure because he turned and followed Memory’s trail. Lavellan watched his back as he walked the path alone — the Roamer of the Beyond, He Who Hunts Alone, solitary in his duty.

Lavellan hated it.

Soon, Solas was a speck in the distance even though only a few minutes had passed.

That left him with Memory.

He looked at it, a little awkward. Should he make conversation?

“The visions I saw,” he started. “When we... somehow fell in the water... What were they?”

Memory clasped its hands in front of it. “A cross-sharing of memories. Though altered. The same stage yet different players.”

The phantom pain of the stab wound swept like a wave of dull fire over his back. Gone in a breath. But the kiss lingered and stayed, staled on his lips.

“Why did you do that?” he asked, did his best to remove the accusation from it but suspected he only mildly succeeded.

“It was not my doing,” it said. “These waters are vessels for the memories I have collected. It isn’t meant to be swam in.”

His look soured. “We didn’t mean to have a dip. I tried to open a rift back to the physical world but it didn’t work.”

It bowed its head, as if in thought, then it unclasped its hands and hovered closer to Lavellan. “The rift was indeed set for Adamant Fortress,” it admitted. “I interfered and waylaid you both into my realm.”

Lavellan tensed, narrowed his eyes at Memory and itched for his daggers, but he refrained and waited. Not yet. Hear it out first.

“So you could ask us to retrieve the memories?” he guessed.

“Yes, but that was a mere excuse. I simply needed the Dread Wolf gone.”

“So you can be alone with me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I suspect you’re looking for answers.”

He snorted lightly to himself. “I find myself looking for answers about many things lately.”

Memory drifted even closer. He could discern smaller details about it now — the way the core of light within it pulsed like a heart, the hints of a robe on its form, the whispers of a face.

“I hold the answer to a few of them,” it said. “Namely, your bizarre circumstance.”

His eyes snapped up to where he deduced its eyes to be, his breath catching.

“I know how and why you were sent back in time.”

Chapter End Notes

I have a suspicion this wasn't quite the kiss scene you guys were looking for.
(Somewhat inspired by the Hannibal S2 finale which should tell you all you need to know).

To questions never asked

Chapter Notes

“When I had all the answers the questions changed”

— **Paulo Coelho**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

and answers never questioned—

He stared at Memory, as upended as the upside-down waterfalls.

“You know?” he asked, voice faint.

“I do. I am one of many who helped see it come to fruition.”

Lavellan needed to sit down. Since there were no seats around, he settled for the boulder beside him. Solid, steady, dependable boulder. Good on this boulder.

“Alright,” he said slowly, “start from the beginning.”

It hesitated. “What would you consider the beginning?”

“I— I don’t know.” He’d been seeking answers for so long that being confronted by them now left him stumped. “Alright, let’s start with why. Why did you reverse time?”

Memory’s light flickered, steady oceanic pulse. “Lost of all his other options, Fen’Harel took a risk with using red lyrium, but that risk proved detrimental. Red lyrium corrupts even powerful beings such as him. He was not in a state of mental fortitude to resist the red lyrium’s song for long, and he knew it. It pressed him to hurry the ritual he’d been preparing.”

“The ritual to dismantle the Veil?”

“Yes, but that was not all it would do. Once the Veil falls, the raw power of that event would need to be focused in order to reshape reality. That would have required his magic. The red lyrium was meant to provide the power needed to collapse the Veil so he could conserve his magic for the reshaping. Unfortunately, the red lyrium had slowly corrupted his magic.”

“Tell him red lyrium is not a viable path,” Solas had said in that red lyrium future and Lavellan had felt it then, the traces of red lyrium in Solas’ magic. But that red lyrium was tame in comparison to the kind Solas had used in the past timeline.

“Had he continued as he was, the reshaping of reality would have gone terribly wrong,” said Memory.

“What was supposed to happen without the red lyrium’s interference?”

“His creation of the Veil has changed the nature of the Fade and the physical realm, and even if he were to remove the Veil, it cannot simply coexist as it once had if left alone. He aimed to ensure

that the two worlds would meld seamlessly, and in that state, the Elvhen who'd fled to the Fade and managed to survive could return to physicality. The elves now, such as you, would have also regained their connection the Fade."

"So, essentially the state of existence in Elvhenan?"

"Yes. But it would have come at the detriment of non-elves. It's possible some could survive, but that altered state would have torn apart their minds."

"Fucking hell," he muttered, rubbing his face.

"He wished for the elves to have their magic back. Why? He did not disclose to anybody. I suspect he had further plans after."

Lavellan frowned at it. "Were you allied with him?"

"...Yes," it admitted and Lavellan tensed, but it shook its head. "But I am not here with the intention of misleading you. For you see, that was the intended result, but something had gone wrong."

"Of course it did. You'd think he'd learn after spending time with me that it never just works. It was the red lyrium, wasn't it?"

"Yes. It is corrupting, and addictive. He had a tolerance, but not immunity, and as I said, he'd steadily lost the mental fortitude required to battle it. He rushed the ritual, magic gradually corrupting, and at that point, we've reached a point of no return. Stopping the ritual would be just as much of a detriment as proceeding with it. It was too late. Any appeals to proceed to a different path was rebuffed. He stopped listening, embodied his chosen name excessively, far removed from his usual lucidity."

Solas. Pride.

"We did not know how his red-lyrium-corrupted magic would alter the results, but we weren't keen on discovering it. And so, I and a group of powerful spirits altered the ritual without his knowing so that it would work to our favour and use our magic rather than his. The best we could have done was a reversal of time. But we had not accounted for you."

"And I'm guessing I fucked up your plans somehow? Because I'm finding that I have a talent for that."

"You have altered its course, yes, but seeing as we did not have a solid course in the first place, I would not dub it a mistake." It looked down, the edges of its robes swaying in a non-existent breeze. "You hold within you the Well of Sorrows. It is, by its very nature, preservative, so it allowed you to hold onto your memories and tethered you to yourself. You've also held the Anchor for a long time and it has given you a unique connection to the Fade. All of these factors combined and made you locked to be a key. Rather than reverse like a stream, time revolved around you."

He chewed on his lip in thought. So it had all been a gamble. "Let's say I never threw a wrench into the plan. What would you have done after time had reversed? And to when would you have reversed it?"

"We would have reversed it to your battle with Corypheus. The goal was to save Fen'Harel's foci so that he would never have to seek other avenues."

His face soured.

“You disagree?” it asked.

“Yes. That still encourages Solas’ plans to continue. You know, the plans that entail driving, oh I don’t know, a good number of my friends mad? If the fighting against him during the three years after the Exalted Council wouldn’t already.”

“I may not know what Fen’Harel has planned after the Veil’s collapse, but there is a danger lurking. We feel it. His plan is necessary.”

He stared at it, ground his teeth. “At what cost? When you don’t even know the supposed danger lurking?”

“If you feel there is a better course of action, you are free to pursue it. Encouraged, even.”

His anger mounted more because he *felt* that there was a better course of action, but he couldn’t see it either. He’d yelled at Solas that there must be other ways but what other ways were there? If Solas just... told him what was going on, maybe they could think of something else. Not this. Not like this. Not a sacrificial path where he let his own pieces fall, where he was the cause of their fall, delivering death left and right because that was the only way he saw. Because that was his own twisted way of *saving* those he loved to prevent them from being burdened.

“He just... did it,” he said. “He stabbed me.” Lavellan hugged himself and his lips twisted. “I mean, I stabbed him too last time but—” But there hadn’t been any pretences that Lavellan was there for anything else besides delivering Solas’ death. Fuck’s sake, they were embracing in the vision. He’d kissed Lavellan after stabbing him. What kind of—

“If it makes you feel better, that vision has left him torn and shaken. To see the possibility of his actions, to bring about your end... The waters have absorbed his regret. I sent him away for his own sake too.”

“No, that doesn’t make me feel better.”

“What do you plan to do about him?”

“I don’t know,” he said. His gaze dropped and he hung his head. “But he can’t know. He can’t know my circumstances.” Had he been a better man, maybe he would’ve felt terrible about lying to Solas, to everyone, but there was only resignation and defeat on his end. This was the only advantage he had over Solas and even Corypheus, and what dying man would relinquish his only weapon?

[*Is unhar sael*](#), whispered the Well.^[1]

So he did.

“You said we cross-shared memories?” Lavellan asked. “Does he know that’s what happened? My intention of not telling him anything will kind of be rendered null if he figures out what happened from the waters.”

“He would be familiar with the mechanisms of vessels holding memories, but he would not have encountered something of this magnitude nor would he have willingly swam in one. It is... not recommended.”

“It almost sounds as if you’re chiding me for taking a dip in the forbidden water,” he grumbled, some tension leaving him. “So he’ll dismiss them as hypothetical situations...?”

“Or unreliable visions, a mixture of many components of individual memories arraying.”

“Like a dream.”

“Precisely.” It paused, swayed in a way that made it seem like it was fidgeting. “And if he asks, I am not beholden to answer him properly. You need not worry. Whether you choose to reveal to him the truth of your circumstance is up to your discretion.”

“But you’ll answer my questions?”

“Yes.”

He frowned. “Why? Don’t you work for him?”

Its light flared briefly. “I do not answer to him. I assisted him, yes, but make no mistake. My allegiance is to the safety of this world.”

“Which world?” he challenged

“I made a promise to someone,” it said. “To protect the world. I thought Fen’Harel would deliver the safety of the entire world despite the great cost.”

“He planned to tear down the Veil! I don’t know how that’s delivering the safety of the entire world!”

“I did say at great cost. Sacrificing one canvas over having both be destroyed.”

He muttered under his breath and nearly gouged his eyes out.

“If you stop the Dread Wolf and save the world from him,” said Memory, “can you save the world from what he was trying to save it from?”

“For fuck’s sake, I’m still dealing with the ancient darkspawn fossil. Can the world just stay fixed for five fucking ages? Why can’t someone else do it? *Besides* Solas.”

It stared at him. “*Would* you be able to leave it up to someone else?”

Lavellan stilled.

“You did not run from being Inquisitor when time reversed. You put yourself through this ordeal, you push to try and change the Dread Wolf’s mind. The world has need of you, and you will not allow yourself to rest so long as you see it as your responsibility. Where do you draw your line? Where do you stop? Will you say you’ll rest after Fen’Harel is defeated?” It may have only had an impression of a face, but its stare still pinned him. “Are you capable of resting?”

“I’m not fit to exist in stillness.”

At his silence, Memory’s light softened and it drifted closer, placed its hand over his knee.

“One day,” it said, “I hope it lets you rest. But for now, I am willing to place confidence in you.”

“No,” he whispered, face falling. “Don’t. Don’t put any confidence in me. I don’t know what I’m doing, I don’t even know if I’m doing the right thing. I don’t need another person to let down. You can’t pin the fate of an entire world on one person’s shoulders.”

“Must you be alone in bearing it?”

"I'm the only one who remembers," he hissed. "That's enough responsibility already!"

"I remember too. You and I, we are the only ones to remember. The memories of that future have been entrusted to me to dispense. I'd thought myself alone too, and I hardly know how to proceed either, but you never asked for this. Our panic and lack of contingency plans has caused you suffering." It retracted its hand and Lavellan reached into his pocket to grip his grounding stone. "And for that, I apologise. Truly."

Lavellan could only nod numbly. "So, where does this leave us now?"

To that, it stayed silent and Lavellan almost laughed. Great. The two people left who remembered and they didn't even know what to do.

"There may be... another option," said Memory. He gave it a querying glance. "I had hoped but... Do you really not recall? Did the Veil's collapse not stir you?"

"The only thing it stirred me from was my death. Quite rudely too." Once again, his joking tone missed its mark and it ended up being bitter instead. "What am I supposed to recall?"

Memory held its hands in front of itself and returned to the edge of the water, stared into its depths. "You feel uncomfortable in the Fade, do you not? Pushing, pulling, pressing against all sides of you, even against sides you had not been aware of. Yet this was not the case before."

The faint needles in his blood prodded at the walls of his veins again but he pushed it away. He could push it away better thanks to Memory and what it had done to him.

"You're saying the Veil's collapse caused it?" he asked. "But the Veil is intact again. Well, sort of."

"From blood you were tethered, and to blood you fell, made to forget." It turned and faced him once more. "You fight to wake against it but blood curdles when left alone and it has grown thick. That is why the Fade hurts you."

Lavellan stared at it in a long, long, silence. Then, with supreme eloquence, responded, "What the fuck."

Memory stared back, serene as ever.

"You were doing so well on not being ominous and cryptic," he sighed. "What's that supposed to mean now?"

"Something you must discover for yourself."

"I thought you were going to answer my questions?"

"Yes, but this I cannot answer. It is for your own sake. Would you rather drink from a glass or open your mouth while submerged in an ocean?"

"You're very fond of your water metaphors."

"I like water."

He looked around him, at the large stretches of water and rising waterfalls. "Yes, I... gathered."

"But I can point you in the right direction."

He cast it a sceptical look. “And this will help me with the current situation?”

“It could,” said Memory. “Or it could not. But I can open the path if you wish to traverse it and find out.”

“What is it then?” he asked tentatively.

Memory swept her arm out and the surface of the water beside him shimmered briefly with visions of trees and elven ruins, before fading to its non-reflective yet metallic surface. “In the Dirthavaren, there linger remnants of the Elvhen. Those remnants will point you towards your destination. Search for them. Follow them.” It faced him. “But as I said, the blood has curdled and it blocks you from those paths. You have forgotten. But I can help you remember, equip you with the means necessary to push through the curtain yourself.”

“I was following until you mentioned blood again,” he admitted.

Its light flickered again and its swaying slowed slightly, as if it was thinking.

“Memories dwell within the tangible,” it explained. “Even simple Wisps retain and make memories, though limited. Objects can store memories though they cannot make them. Powerful spirits can retain, and make — and steal— memories. Sometimes, memories are locked away by the being to protect themselves. That is the case with you. I can unlock it, in a manner of speaking.”

“Protect myself?” he asked. “What from?” What am I forgetting?”

Memory gave him a grave look, which reassured him little. “Are you sure you want to pursue those questions?”

“You tell me ominous things about myself, say that remembering them might help me deal with Solas, and think I’d say no?” His head spun. He’d thought getting his answers would end the questions but that was foolish of him.

“Memories are a burden, and you already carry far too many. I do not want to add it. Not when the world does not see it fit to stop piling more atop you.”

“That’s surprisingly considerate of you.”

“Why is that surprising?”

“I—” He pursed his lips and looked away. “You worked for Solas, and I opposed him. Don’t you see me as an enemy?”

“Worked *with*,” it said, mildly ticked, and he couldn’t help but smile. “And I am Memory, not Cruelty. I, more than anyone, understand the pain and burden that memories can bring. I offer you a choice. Will you pursue the path of remembering in the hopes of finding even a scrap of a chance against the Wolf? Even if it pains you?”

He gripped the stone tighter, rolled it in his hand, wished he had somebody to make the choice for him and understood how Bull must have felt now. What a hypocrite he would be if he deferred to another’s judgement.

“I’ve long been acquainted with pain,” he said. “And I’m out of ideas. I’m going to risk it. What should I expect?” Besides, all this talk of blood had him uneasy, and he disliked the thought of his memories being locked away. By himself, no less. Was it wise undoing it?

“The memories will likely be intrusive, and it may be a shock for your body the first time you remember something of significance.” Off to a great start. “The nature of what you remember and its intensity as well as their triggers will be unknown to me. So again, I ask, are you certain?”

“I’m certain,” he said. His choices may be terrible but at least he was decisive with them.

Memory seemed the more hesitant out of the two of them, but nevertheless, it held its hand out to the water. Blue lights shimmered in its depths and a bulb of water rose and hovered over its waiting hand. The water became light, became mist, became sapphire smoke. Memory cupped it in its hands.

“Are you ready?” it asked.

Lavellan nodded.

It drifted towards Lavellan and presented the smoky core of light, then let go. The core dissipated and blanketed him, filled the crypts of himself and illuminated them. Memory drifted back.

The Well of Sorrows rushed upwards, clamoured and wondered like children pressing their faces and hands against the glass of a display in morbid curiosity of the oddity within. They hummed. Lavellan found his eyes closing, the entirety of him swaying to the tuneless song.

[*Ma avy eral var’el*](#)^[21], they whispered.

His eyes snapped open. The Well quelled once more and when he locked eyes with Memory, for a moment, he saw and tasted alpine skies. Gone the moment he noticed. Lavellan shook his head, felt like he'd woken up after an unsatisfying nap.

“How do you feel?” it asked and drifted closer, perched itself beside him on the boulder.

“Strange.”

“You have chosen a difficult path,” said Memory. “I sincerely wish you well.”

“Thank you.” He looked at Memory, at the contained glow of its deep blue light, and now that he was closer, he could discern that the expression on the echoes of its face seemed... sad. The same way that Cassandra’s eyes had looked when she'd held his sobbing self in her arms. The same way that Dorian had glanced at him whenever they'd lapsed into silence while they'd drank. The same way that Sera’s smile had looked whenever she'd offered him food that she'd cooked under the guise of getting his opinion on whether she'd improved or not, but he'd known that she'd just wanted him to eat.

He missed them.

“Come now,” he said and attempted a reassuring smile. “Don’t look at me like that. I’ll be alright.”

It looked down at its hands, its light dimming slightly. “Is that what you tell yourself?”

His smile turned brittle.

Memory looked at him, eyes aglow, and a whispering recollection curled at the back of his mind.

Her. Memory preferred to be *her*.

“I... know you,” he said, frowned. Tentatively, he reached out for her and she raised her hand.

Their fingertips touched and he stared at the warm wash of blue over his fingertips, the amorphous edges of her being which was both solid yet not meeting with his too solid form. He searched her face for any traces of familiarity. It was there, drifting in his subconscious, but he couldn't reach. Anytime he tried, a pulse of pain would throb in his head.

She shook her head. "Do not. You are not ready." She lowered her hand and some of the sadness abated. Memory smiled. "This is enough."

"I know you," he whispered to himself. How? When?

"The Veil's collapse has caused you such great pain, and yet, selfishly, I am glad. I never would have found you otherwise."

"What?" he asked.

But she didn't answer, because something had caught her attention in the distance. Lavellan looked. It was Solas.

"I will do what I can," said Memory, voice low as if ensuring Solas wouldn't hear even if he was still a great distance away. "Examine the memories from Elvhenan and from the previous future in search of what the Dread Wolf is attempting to prevent."

"Will we meet again?" he asked.

Memory smiled, her light flaring. "One day," she promised.

She pulled away and they stayed entrenched in a contemplative silence while waiting for Solas. His mind spun and tangled over the new information and his new objectives, and only left his reveries once Solas arrived, cradling four gleaming shards of light. Memory accepted the memories.

"Thank you," she said and carried the shards to the water, submerged them. The light diffused, coiled around one another, before the darkness swallowed them. Lavellan glanced at Solas, who was already staring at Lavellan. Neither looked away. Self-flagellation lingered behind Solas' eyes and Lavellan could only imagine what Solas was seeing in Lavellan's eyes in return.

"Are you unharmed?" Lavellan asked. A feeble attempt to pretend he'd had a reason for looking.

"I am," he said and smiled weakly. "Shall we go? Before they announce you dead and make a martyr out of you."

"Gods forbid. They already write songs about me as if I'd died. I'd rather not give them reason." He turned to Memory, paused, felt as if he should say something or do something more.

She smiled. "Say the word and I will lead you back to Adamant." She paused, before she clasped her hands in front of her. "Before you go... Will you entertain a request of mine?"

Lavellan nodded. "What is it?"

She stared at the waters again. "Will you share a memory? Somewhere safe. Somewhere warm."

Safe and warm?

The memory came unbidden but not unwanted, and the echoes of warm night winds brushed against his cheeks, a rich and soothing voice whispering in his ears, warm in embrace. Safe in his

mother's arms.

"I have one," he murmured.

The scene shifted around them, and the warm breeze became palpable, the waters shifting to grass, the columns of stone shrinking and branching out into trees. The green sky became bejewelled navy. Memory's domain became that of the forest. Lavellan held his hand up to a nearby tree, felt the bark beneath his fingers.

Children's laughter.

He turned his head, followed the sound. Solas trailed behind him in silence as they passed the tree line and came into a moonlit clearing. Two children ran past him, giggled, shrieked, chased each other in circles in the clearing and his smile softened. There they were, him and his sister. Ellana had twigs in her hair and she ran, crowed in victory as she carried Lavellan's small bow above her head. Over the trees, he could make out the tops of the purple and blue aravel sails. The colours of Clan Lavellan. Homesickness tore into him.

"Give it back! Lana!"

The younger him, who couldn't have been older than eight, chased after Ellana. Rambunctious, energetic Ellana.

Young him tackled her. She screeched. Lavellan laughed with a grimace at the painful noise and Solas stood beside him, an amused smile on his lips.

"Is that you and your sister?"

"Yes. Her shriek is as horrible as I remember."

Their faces were bare, still absent of the vallaslin.

"Alright, you two. Enough of that," said a gentle voice behind him. Lavellan froze.

His mother walked past him, staff in hand, white hair braided into a painfully familiar arrangement. It was how he'd braided his hair when it had been long, in memory of her, and he couldn't help the ragged gasp that escaped him.

"[Mamae](#)^[3]," complained younger him, "she took my bow!"

"He pulled my hair!"

"You kicked me first!"

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Smelly nug says: did not!"

Lavellan's mother sighed and knelt. "Ellana, return his bow please. Mahanon, why did you pull her hair?"

"She kicked me."

"Is this true, Ellana?"

Ellana fidgeted, looked down and traced patterns into the dirt with her foot. “He didn’t want to play with me,” she muttered.

As their mother negotiated between them, Lavellan took a hesitant step forward, eyes wide and trained on the back of her head. Her face. What did she look like? He'd forgotten.

“Does that sound reasonable to both of you?” she asked. Younger him sighed and Ellana beamed.

“Yes, Mae,” they both said.

“Now come, it is late. Sleep is important.”

“Will you sing again, Mae?” asked Ellana.

“Only if you settle in.”

Ellana zipped towards the furs and blankets that had been set up near the edge of the clearing while younger him followed at a more sedate pace. They settled themselves in. His mother placed her staff down, sat between them, and turned.

He finally saw her face for the first time in decades.

Lavellan smiled, eyes blurring from tears.

“Hello,” he whispered.

She wrapped her arms around younger him and Ellana as they curled up on either side of her and smiled. She sang. Her voice settled itself in his mind as if it hadn't been decades since he'd last seen her. As if he'd never forgotten. He approached, knelt at the edge of the furs, and reached out for her, ghosting his fingers over her cheek, following the curve of Sylaise's vallaslin.

[“Iras ma ghilas, da’len^{\[4\]},”](#) she crooned.

[“Ara ma’nedan ashir,^{\[5\]}”](#) he sang with her, but he couldn’t continue because his throat seized. His shoulders trembled and his tears fell. Lavellan retracted his hand and let it rest on his lap, contented himself with watching and listening as he wiped his tears. The warm winds whispered, rustled the leaves and became the percussions to her voice. Her voice wasn’t as perfect as he remembered. Not as in tune, a little flat on the higher parts, but it was still the most beautiful sound to him.

Ellana was already asleep by the fourth round. Younger him smiled up at Mamae. She smiled back at him as she ended her lullaby.

“Why aren’t you sleeping yet?” she asked.

“I wanted to listen,” Mahanon admitted. He looked so... small. Youthful and bright-eyed, barefoot and wild, clueless to the world outside of their clan, clueless to the pain awaiting him.

His mother brushed her fingers through Ellana’s hair, frowned as she pulled out leaves and twigs.

“Mae?” asked Mahanon.

“Hm?”

“Ar lath.”

She smiled at him again and kissed the top of his head, then looked at Lavellan. Lavellan as he was

now, broken and battered and bruised as he was, and she offered him the same warm smile. “Ar lath, Mahanon. [Ma ane emma solas i nehn^{\[6\]}](#).”

Lavellan pursed his lips and hung his head once more, covered his eyes. Warm tears slipped between the cracks of his fingers.

“I miss you,” he whispered shakily.

He sobbed in that clearing where the stars glimmered and the night’s breath blanketed them, longing for his mother.

Once his sobs dwindled and he was more put together, he stood and wiped the tears, laughing at his snot. His mother was no longer looking at him, instead brushing her fingers through Ellana and Mahanon’s hair.

“Thank you,” whispered Memory’s voice from around them.

Lavellan tilted his head skywards and exhaled, smiled serenely. “No, thank you. I’d forgotten her face.” He looked back at his mother, memorised her face, held it close to his chest and treasured this moment.

Solas still lingered by the tree line. Lavellan gestured for him to come over. He hesitated, before he shuffled forward into the moonlight.

“I am sorry,” said Solas. “This is a private moment and I am intruding.”

“It’s no intrusion,” said Lavellan truthfully, too exhausted for lies right now.

Solas stared at him but Lavellan kept his gaze on his mother. Lavellan knew they had to return but he savoured this. Just for a few more moments. His port in the storm before he had to return to the rolling waves.

“That lullaby,” said Solas. “You always hum it.”

“Do I?”

“Absentmindedly. We feared bringing it up would make you stop.” He paused. “Do not.”

Lavellan blinked at the request, glanced back at him, but it was now Solas’ turn to not meet his gaze.

“The others enjoy it,” Solas clarified.

“The others?”

He hesitated, then admitted, “*I* also enjoy it.”

A traitorous warmth coated his heart.

“It’s home,” he explained, because that was easier than acknowledging the conflict of emotions Solas gave him. “What few reminders of her that I have because I’ve forgotten her face. Anytime I tried to remember her, it was like looking into a foggy mirror. She was there, but she wasn’t real. Now she is.” Lavellan’s gaze softened at the scene before him and he murmured, “I’m glad she is.”

“May I ask how she died?”

Lavellan recalled it far too easily. "She got sick. The illness claimed her fast."

"I'm sorry," said Solas.

"Thank you."

He remembered this scene one last time, wrapped it with care within the layers of his affection and the folds of his love, held it close to his heart.

"Goodnight, Mamae," he murmured and looked up. "Alright, Memory. We're ready."

"Open a rift once more. I will redirect you to where the original in Adamant was."

Lavellan looked to Solas, who nodded. He cast one final glance over his shoulder at his family, then turned his head, looking towards the future. He braced himself and reached for the Veil. Solas wrapped his hand gently around Lavellan's wrist and he weathered through the lightning in his veins, Solas easing some of the pain.

The Anchor latched onto the Veil and Lavellan went through the motions. Turned the key in the lock. A rift sparked. Opened. Lavellan could see the faint images of Adamant, blurry shapes in motion.

Together, they stepped forward.

"Seeker, it's been hours," said Varric.

Cassandra stared at where the rift had once been, palms sore from how hard she was gripping the hilt of her sheathed sword, feet aching from her refusal to move. Her shoulder throbbed in its sling but she ignored it. Her quiet vigil. Other Inquisition soldiers joined her, lingered in the courtyard, waited for their Inquisitor.

"He said he will be back," she said. "Tell the others to stop saying they are dead. They will return. I have faith."

Varric sighed. "I know you do. I was going to say, you looked cold. I'm going to get you a blanket."

"No, give that to someone who needs it more."

He lingered and a few seconds of silence passed between them. Cassandra shot him a curious glance.

"Is there something you needed?" she asked.

Varric rubbed the back of his head. "I wanted to say thank you," he said. "For having my back when we were fighting that demon."

She smiled and nodded. "You are unhurt?"

"Broken rib, but nothing punctured. How's the shoulder?"

“Survivable.”

He chuckled. “Seeker, I think you’d consider a stabbed kidney survivable.”

She returned his chuckle, albeit drier. Varric hesitated for a beat, then left her. Cassandra watched the skies where a certain raven circled, also waiting, and for a moment, she felt kindred to the bird.

A blanket draped over her shoulders. She started. Varric fixed it, made sure it covered her, taking care with her shoulder, then joined her in her vigil. Cassandra clutched the blanket tighter around herself with a secret smile and murmured her gratitude.

Meanwhile, The Grey Wardens didn’t know what to make of current events. The Inquisition members refused to pass them judgement, and all anyone would ever say was, “We’re waiting for the Inquisitor.” So they carted off their dead, stared into the faces of their mistake, and wept in the quiet spaces.

Commander Cullen joined Cassandra and Varric. Blackwall fell in line beside them, followed by a shivering Sera, then Bull, who put a blanket over Sera’s shoulders. Cole flitted in the corner where the injured were, brought water to the thirsty, sleep to the weeping, but he too had his eyes intent on where the rift had been, wind whistling in the wake of their aching victory. Vivienne fooled nobody with her pacing. Dorian joined them and stayed beside Bull. Together they stood. A bulwark against the uncertain, a beacon of faith and trust and hope and hope and *hope*.

Come home.

The twin moons spectated upon their fretting, the desert winds unkind in this fortress of blood and ruin. Dead bodies had been cleared. Demons had been turned to ash. But the blood had seeped into the stones and not even the tears of the innocent could cleanse them.

Come home.

They whispered the word *martyr*. Whispered *hero*, *saviour*, *soldier*, *leader*, *legend*, and Sera hated every word because Lavellan was just *idiot*.

There were whispers of the apostate too. *Loyal*, *humble*, *wise*, *kind*, *defender*. Bull scoffed. Solas was *self-satisfied asshole* and they still had a game of chess to finish.

Cole just wanted them to

come home—

Green lightning sparked in the air and the elves in the vicinity, including Sera, felt the Veil surge, rear, lash. Like an elastic pulled back. The string of a bow thwacking on her forearm when she held it strange. Cassandra’s expression lit in hope. They stirred in their vigil during the interim of silence, breaths held.

The Veil tore and the rift opened. They hovered their hands over their weapons or brandished their magic, stared in the face of a green sun and the world beyond it.

Inquisitor Lavellan stepped out, Solas right beside him. He closed the rift with a hand stretching forwards and gripping, as if ordering a squall to quell. They had no doubts in their hearts that the squall would listen.

The rift closed and embers of green snowed over their heads.

Their Inquisitor was home.

Everyone looked torn between cleaving Lavellan in half or weeping on the spot. Cassandra shouted. She rushed forward and crushed him against her armour in a hug, reached for Solas when he tried to edge away. That broke the stillness in Adamant. The soldiers yelled and cheered in victory, and he found himself crushed in a tight group hug. Solas grunted beside him.

“You’re an ass!” bawled Sera.

Lavellan laughed faintly, squashed under somebody’s armpit.

“Would you all stop being so embarrassing?” came Vivienne’s icy voice, though it sounded a little more thawed than usual. “Let them breathe. If the Fade will not kill them, then your malodours certainly will.”

They stepped back and gave him and Solas breathing room. Lavellan smiled at them. No more needles in his veins, no more wrongness, no longer feeling as if his skin was ill-fitting.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said.

“We would have waited for longer without fail,” said Cullen. “What matters is that you’re back.”

A black blot swooped towards Lavellan and he knew the shape, knew that caw, and he held his arm up. His raven perched on it, cawed in distress at him, and he brought his arm in to cradle her close. She settled.

Stroud rushed forward, frantic. “Andraste’s mercy,” he muttered once he saw them. “You’re alive.”

“Maker, what will it take to kill you?” came Hawke’s disbelieving voice as she appeared from within the ranks of the other Inquisition soldiers. She stopped in front of him. “No, that came out wrong. I don’t want you dead. Turn.” She grabbed him by the shoulders, manhandled him about, tutting under her breath as she inspected him, then moved on to Solas, who tried to dodge her unsuccessfully. After finding whatever she was looking for, she nodded and stepped back. “Good. Not a pair of demons come to shiv us in our sleep.”

“I could do it while you’re awake,” Lavellan said.

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re not that coordinated.”

Lavellan scanned everyone. No visible major injuries within his inner circle besides Cassandra, who had her shield arm in a sling. Varric carried himself in a way that suggested either bruised or broken ribs, and Sera’s right eye was swollen, but that seemed to be it.

“You have got to tell us what happened,” grunted Iron Bull. “That demon was practically shitting on you.”

“Long story,” sighed Lavellan. Very, *very* long, and something he couldn’t disclose.

A Grey Warden shuffled forward, eyes wide behind his helm, and Lavellan’s expression shifted into one of terse reprimand, already knew what they were going to ask. Already knew the kind of

dissent Lavellan was about to stir up with his choice. It had stirred others up last time, too.

“Inquisitor,” he greeted. “I stand on behalf of the Grey Wardens. We would like to make up for Clarel’s... tragic mistake.”

“Tragic?” said Hawke, incensed. “Do you know how many people died? Do you even think about anything beyond the Blight?”

“Hawke,” warned Stroud.

“No, fuck this. I held my tongue when we had to run from the giant spider demon, but enough. The Wardens have clearly overstepped and they need severe oversight.”

Not even five minutes back and they were already bickering.

“What, you just gonna bang out the ones who can stop this Blight business?” asked Sera.

Hawke scowled. “I didn’t say kick them out, I’m saying they need stricter supervision.”

“That, but they do need to leave Orlais,” said Vivienne. “They are foolish and desperate and they are the relics of a bygone age.”

Lavellan pursed his lips at that. “With all due respect, Vivienne, the Blight was just ten years ago. I wouldn’t call that a bygone age.”

“Perhaps,” said Solas, “but that does not remove the fact that they are single-minded and play with forces they don’t understand.”

The Grey Wardens looked like children watching their parents fight, cowering away in the corner, framed by the shadows of looming adults spitting and pointing their fingers into the other’s chest.

Lavellan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Enough,” he ordered. That paused the debate and they looked at him in varying states of vexation. “I’ve had a long while in the Fade to think about it, trust me. They’re staying.”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Solas. “There may still be corruption within their ranks! Corypheus’ influence may yet linger.”

“I am aware.”

“And you would let them stay?”

Well I let you stay, didn’t I? Lavellan almost said but held his tongue. “It’s a risk I’m willing to take. I’m putting them far, *far* away from Corypheus and the Venatori. You’re right, they’re single-minded, and that is their downfall. It’s also their strength. Better I risk it now than be unprepared in the future in the event of a Blight.” Solas looked as if he’d swallowed a ball of fire. Lavellan shot the Wardens a hard stare. “But don’t mistake this as leniency. I won’t flagellate you for your actions because you can all do that to yourselves, but I do expect you to atone. For the rest of your lives. Blood is a heavy price to pay. You can start by helping the Inquisition. Even if your intentions were well-meaning, the end goal is not everything. If you twist so far from yourself just to achieve it, you’ve achieved nothing and lost everything.”

The Wardens hung their head, shuffled. Solas sighed behind him. Lavellan wanted to hit him and say, “That’s for you too.” He rubbed his face. Fuck, he’d lost his bow in the Fade.

He turned to Cullen. “Commander, I want a report of how many people we’ve lost, both the Inquisition and the Wardens, and the state of our injured. Identify them as best as you can. Every single one. A name to every face, and if they have one, family or close friends.” More letters to write. “I also want an inventory of our supplies.”

Cullen nodded. “At once.”

Lavellan paused, thoughts momentarily drifting back to the answers in the Dales, itched to find it, itched to figure things out, but no. He needed to get his immediate duties out of the way first.

“Let’s bury the dead,” he murmured. “We do that first, then we... figure all this out. I’m not forcing anybody. You know yourself best. Rest if you’re tired or hurting. Today has been a very long night for all of us.”

“What about you?” Dorian asked gently. “You need to rest too. You’ve been under quite the ordeal.”

“I’ll rest after this,” he said.

They set to work. The night was far from over.

Chapter End Notes

Watch as DA4 proves me wrong on all accounts. (Lavellan, honey, please sit down for like five minutes and get some rest, holy shit).

Editing this chapter took me longer than usual because I've been hit and crippled by feelings about Solas and the writing and the characterisation and I'm wanting to do that so much justice and I'm trying my best. This is a brilliant character right here. Not a morally good one, but the complexity, the intricacies, the DILEMMAS! Some good fucking food.

tl;dr gripped by Solas feels. Hurts.

Translation:

[1] **Is unhar sael:** He lied first. [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ma avy eral var’el:** You have been asleep too long. [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Mamae:** Mother. [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Iras ma ghilas, da'len:** Where will you go, little one [\[↑\]](#)

[5] **Ara ma'nedan ashir:** Lost to me in sleep? [\[↑\]](#)

[6] **Ma ane emma solas i nehn:** You are my pride and joy. [\[↑\]](#)

Grasped the endless undertaking

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

burdens of teeming chasms waking—

“Stroud is on his way to Weisshaupt,” said Leliana, watching Lavellan’s raven eat from her hands. Her hood was down today — a rare occurrence. “We’ve sent a few of the Grey Wardens to the Storm Coast and let a few remain in the Western Approach to deal with the darkspawn and any demons they encounter.”

“I’ve sent word to the Hessarians at the Coast too,” said Lavellan. “They’ll work with and supervise the Wardens and keep an eye out for more Venatori smugglers. After our ambush on them a few weeks ago, I doubt they’re willing to risk dealing near the Coast ever again.”

“Good. And we have a strong presence at the Approach. The Venatori are unlikely to visit these areas. You’ve dealt Corypheus a significant blow, Inquisitor.”

His raven soon had her fill and perched herself back on his shoulders. He rubbed the underside of her beak with his finger and she fluffed her feathers. She really needed a name. Lavellan hated every single one he’d come up with because they didn’t *fit* and it had to fit because he was growing increasingly attached to this raven and she deserved the best.

“We should spread word that the Grey Wardens support the Inquisition,” he said. “They carry respect in other nations. Especially the ones who’d suffered during the Blight.”

“I will take it up with Josephine.” She put the grains in her hand back into its canister and dusted her hands off, gaze distant. “Thank you for letting the Wardens stay. By any chance, was the Hero of Ferelden at Adamant? I’ve heard nothing about it but maybe...”

She must be worried about Tabris. “No, she wasn’t there.”

Leliana relaxed slightly. “I see.”

“You must miss her.”

“More than I can bear, sometimes,” she admitted. “But she has a duty, as do I. Perhaps when this is all over, I can join her. But for now, we must plan for what is to come. Taking a large portion of Corypheus’ army will mean nothing if Orlais falls to chaos, and I fear his agents are sowing dissent among the court.” Oh, they sure were. One of them was even arranging the masquerade where all the important people of Orlais were conveniently going to be gathered! “We have three months until the masquerade at Halamshiral. Josephine and I are still trying to arrange the matter of invitations, but I suspect the arm-twisting we need to do will decrease once word of your ordeal at Adamant spreads.”

“Is this literal arm-twisting?”

“Inquisitor, how could you accuse me of such a thing?”

His raven cawed and took flight, dashed out of the rookery’s open door. Off to do her thing once more.

"I hope she doesn't steal more things," said Lavellan.

Leliana smiled. "Still no name for her?"

"Afraid not."

"Perhaps something in elven. Your language is lovely and elegant. It befits her, wouldn't you say?"

"Bull calls her mayhem."

"Elegant mayhem."

They shared a soft chuckle, before her eyes shifted into something sombre. stood, leaned on the rookery's railings, gazed at the small shrine she'd assembled in an alcove of the rookery. "Divine Justinia..." she started, "her soul, or the spirit which took on her form... What was she like?"

"Calm," he said. "Cryptic. But she was patient and understanding. She— In the Fade, the first time, she pushed me out of the way of the Nightmare demon and— I'm sorry, Leliana. I couldn't —"

She shook her head. "No, do not blame yourself. Thank you for trying. I know you did your best."

It wasn't enough. "She wanted me to tell you something." Leliana looked at him. "She said: I'm sorry. I failed you too."

Her expression fell. "Oh," she whispered and bowed her head, raised her hood. "Thank you."

Lavellan stood with her and rested his hand on the railings.

Below them, researchers walked the length of the library, scanning the shelves or reading at a table. At the very bottom was Solas, hunched over his table, hands flying over sheets of parchment filled with sketches.

"He is planning for the next fresco," she observed.

Lavellan watched him work, then sighed. "He is upset with me."

She shot him a sly smile. "Lover's quarrel?".

"We're not lovers." What *were* they now? "Besides, I argue with him so often that I doubt he harbours any feelings of that nature."

And yet he kissed you so tenderly as he wrenched the knife in your back.

"And what of you?" she asked.

He laughed dryly, the sound feeble. "If you want drama of this kind, look towards Dorian and the Iron Bull. Perhaps Ambassador Josephine's secret admirer." *To whichever god out there would listen, watch over Blackwall and may Leliana never cut off his balls.*

Leliana didn't take the bait. "I already know. And that Sera has been spending an interesting amount of time in the Undercroft. A young Templar has taken an interest in one of my agents, unfortunately she much prefers the company of women. Though another healer girl is fond of that very Templar. Bull's lieutenant? Acclasi? Unable to sit still as he listens to a certain someone's songs. I could list them all, Inquisitor." His look soured with each example but she remained

undeterred. "You, however, have been a great source of debate and mystery."

"Barely any mystery on my end." He paused. "Debate? Amongst whom?"

"Skyhold," she said, much too cheery this early in the morning. "And I digress. You and Solas?"

"He is a talented mage with brilliant knowledge and insight to share, and I respect him."

"Or course, Inquisitor."

He threw his arms up. "I'm going to go get some paperwork sorted before I judge Erimond this afternoon." It may just numb his mind enough so that he wouldn't throttle Erimond right in the middle of the Great Hall later.

Lavellan headed for the stairs, told himself that he was *not* escaping. There was much left to do, was all. Besides the matters within the Inquisition, now he had personal matters on top of everything. Meeting Memory had answered one question, but twenty more had arisen in its place, but he supposed that was just how it went. Learn new things, find more questions. On and on. How could he justify going to the Dales? Maybe say he wanted to see the state of the civil war?

So embroiled was he in his thoughts that he missed the door to enter the Great Hall through the library and instead descended all the way to the bottom of the atrium. Right into Solas' rotunda.

Oh.

Leliana must be cackling silently above them.

He was about to continue but Solas was already looking at him, brows furrowed. Lavellan sighed.

"How long exactly have you been looking like you've swallowed a box of nails?" he asked.

Solas straightened. Lavellan noted the charcoal stains on the side of his hand and tips of his fingers as he approached.

"Are you not at all concerned about sending the Grey Wardens out? So soon after Adamant?"

"It's not as if I sent them alone," he said. "The Inquisition has a strong presence in the Approach, and the Blades of Hessarian have the Coast. After the business with the Qunari, I doubt the Venatori would return there either."

"Why did you give them another chance?"

Lavellan's gaze skated over the frescoes, at the howling wolves detailing the birth of the Inquisition. They were records of Lavellan's actions, but Solas had placed a little of himself there too. Looking back on it, all the clues had been here. In his art, in his presentation, mannerism, views, actions.

He looked back at Solas.

In his words.

"Why did I give them another chance?" Lavellan repeated, looked up in thought, then shrugged.

"Because I'm a fool with a wretched heart. I want to give those who want to atone a chance to do so. Was their plan of directly killing an Old God to circumvent the Blight a terrible idea? Yes. Was their use of blood magic dangerous, irresponsible, and inane? Yes. And they know it. So, let them prove themselves. They will carry the death of their comrades on their conscience."

Solas stared at him, the furrow in his brows easing, but he still had that displeased pull to his lips and Lavellan really should stop paying these things such close attention.

“How are you this idealistic?” he asked.

“You are so grim and fatalistic sometimes that I just want to be as idealistic as possible to annoy you.”

“I *am* grim and fatalistic. There is no sometimes.”

“We should swap one day. You be the idealist and I can be the fatalist.”

“I would not like to see you become one. Your convictions are your strength.” Solas looked away, gaze growing distant. “And I have already tried idealism,” he murmured.

Lavellan smiled softly and asked, “Would you care to try again?”

He didn’t answer.

“In any case, the Blight is not something one smugly outsmarts,” Solas said instead and walked back to the table.

Lavellan suppressed another sigh. “What’s done is done. We did what we could in a difficult situation. Now, we move forward.”

Solas picked up his charcoal once more and returned to sketching. “Indeed,” he said.

Lavellan lingered for a while longer, but that seemed to be end of their conversation. He turned to leave—

“This friend of yours,” said Solas and Lavellan stopped. “The one you said I loosely resembled...” Lavellan’s blood chilled. He gave Solas a hesitant look over his shoulder but Solas was still hunched over the sketches on the desk, charcoal scratching on paper. “Why did you kill them?”

The question struck him in the stomach.

Above them, the ravens cawed and papers rustled. A cold breeze wafted in through one of the open windows. Solas stopped drawing and hung his head, turned away.

“No, I apologise,” he said. “It was an intrusive question and I should not have asked it.”

Lavellan licked his dry lips, mind flashing through brimstone and ringing metal and slick blood.

“I had to,” he answered softly. Solas’ head rose, likely hadn’t expected Lavellan to answer. “I had to. He endangered the lives of those I cared about.”

“Did you care for him?”

He had to pause before he could answer so that a dry, incoherent sound wouldn’t escape him. “Very much.”

Solas’ hand clenched on the table, smudging the charcoal on the page.

“Would you do it again?”

Lavellan stared at the tense line of his shoulders. “I would prefer not to.”

Solas straightened his back and his hands shook as he raised them off the table to clasp them behind him. He faced Lavellan with a haunted look.

Oh.

He was shaken from the Fade.

“What... did you see?” Lavellan asked gently. “In the Fade?”

“Like you, Inquisitor,” he said, though his voice was faint, “I killed someone who I...” Solas looked away, as if he couldn’t bear to look at him for long. “I killed someone dear to me.”

Lavellan held himself dreadfully still in fear that a sob or a struggling noise would escape and give himself away.

“Would you actually do it?” Lavellan found himself asking.

Solas gave him a sad, wry smile. “I would prefer not to,” he echoed and stared at his murals. “Do you recall in Haven when you told me you do not want to lose yourself in your role and the title others have given you without your consent?”

It felt like a distant memory already. “Yes.”

“If I may be so bold as to ask...” He looked at Lavellan again and he could tell it pained Solas to do so. To force himself to stare Lavellan in the eye. “Please stop me if I ever lose myself.”

“Do you think I can?”

“I think you have a good chance.”

“I’ll stop you from losing yourself first,” declared Lavellan. “Will you do the same for me?”

He and Solas shared a long look. Neither of them moved.

Finally, Solas cracked a tentative smile. “You have yourself a deal.”

The Great Hall was full. It was relieving, somewhat. As beautiful and grandiose as the Great Hall had been in Elvhenan, it had also been frigid and vacant, and Lavellan would have hated presiding over it. Now though, it was packed. Everybody watched him as he walked towards the throne for the judgements, the increased weight of their reverence resting like a viscous mantle of honey and bone on his shoulders.

He supposed walking out of the Fade twice tended to do that.

The throne though... They've changed it.

Lavellan stopped and stared. They did not choose the flames of Andraste this time. Not the seat borne of fire.

This time, three, large pairs of unfurling wings burst from the back of the seat, the rays of a stylised sun crowning the top of the seat's back. The rays and the edges of the wings were gilded, and the

sunlight filtering in through the stained glass windows behind the throne reflected off the gilt and painted the walls with numinous light.

“Impressive, is it not?” asked Josephine, beholding the throne with him. “They wanted to finish it before you got back.”

He could do nothing else but gawk. “Why wings?” he asked.

“I believe they were inspired by your raven. They considered flames to, if you will excuse my pun, herald back to Andraste.”

“Why didn’t they?”

“They wanted you to have your own symbol, I suspect. Separate from Andraste, separate from the Inquisition. Are you... unhappy with it?”

Unhappy? *Unhappy?*

“Josephine this is remarkable. And I feel entirely undeserving of the gesture. I would like to meet with the sculptors to thank them.”

She smiled and wrote on her board. “I will certainly pass the message on, Inquisitor. Are you ready to receive the defendants?”

He was going to sit on *that*? Holy shit.

“How many?” he asked.

“Two.”

Lavellan steeled himself and lowered himself onto the throne, marvelled at how comfortable it was.

Feared how comfortable it was.

If he spent long enough like this, how soon would he forget himself and lose himself in the legend? Forget Mahanon and become Inquisitor? Herald? Nameless and faceless save for his stories which would worsen and twist the more the decades passed?

Strangely, the deal he'd made with Solas gave him some peace of mind.

“Bring them in,” he said to distract himself.

The guards escorted a Grey Warden in chains, her head and shoulders slumped, shadows beneath and within her eyes. Lavellan gripped the arm rest again. Josephine introduced her as Ser Ruth. She'd willingly handed herself in for the crime of killing another of the Order to bind a demon.

“I can’t use the greater good to justify my crimes,” said Ser Ruth. “As if it would create a future I could be a part of! Let me be an example of the cost. Know that this is the line, and it isn’t to be crossed.”

“You think the example of your death will draw the line more clearly?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How long do you think a warning lasts, Ser Ruth?”

“I...” She paused, gave him a confused frown.

“Your death, whether as an example or not, won’t accomplish what you hope it will.” His gaze softened. He'd always had a soft spot for those like her. “Do you regret your actions?”

“Every second,” she said.

“Good.” He eased his grip on the arm rest. “Death is too easy. Atone like the rest of the Wardens. Dedicate what’s left of your life for the betterment of others, be another helping hand in the world, not another meaningless death.”

“But Your Worship— This isn’t... What message does this send?”

“That answering death with death isn’t always the path to take. This is your punishment, Ser Ruth. You will be doing your own work independent from the Wardens. I expect monthly reports of what you’ve been up to.”

She hung her head, mulled it over, then looked up at him with glistening eyes. “Yes, Your Worship. I will spread good in the world, in whatever capacity I can.”

He nodded. The guard beside her freed her from her shackles and she left the Great Hall. Lavellan slumped slightly into his seat. Now came the next one. A smarmy brat.

Erimond’s protests could be heard from a mile away. Lavellan’s mood darkened and he rested his cheek against his knuckles, drummed his fingers on the other arm rest. Erimond had resisted on the way to Skyhold too, and Lavellan had done everybody and himself a favour when he'd knocked Erimond out for the whole trip. What a peaceful trip that had been.

“When you present him,” Lavellan said to Josephine, “drop his titles. Just call him Livius. He has no power here.”

Erimond appeared at the Great Hall’s entrance, skulking across the Hall with a sneer.

Josephine cleared her throat. “I present Livius, who remains loyal to Corypheus.”

He rounded his sneer onto Josephine. “I am a *lord*, you bitch! Introduce me as such!”

“Lord you bitch Livius,” said Lavellan, “I appreciate that we all weren’t raised in the latrine like you, so do refrain from yelling.”

A few laughs echoed in the Hall. Erimond’s face reddened.

“I recognise none of these proceedings,” he spat. “You have no authority to judge me.”

“On the contrary,” said Josephine. “Many officials have communicated that they will defer to the Inquisitor on this matter.”

“Because they *fear*. Not just Corypheus, but Tevinter, rightful ruler of every piece of ground you’ve ever trod in your pathetic life, *rattus*.”

Someone gasped.

He was going to enjoy driving a sword through this bastard’s gullet. Briefly, he considered declaring him Tranquil. Briefly. He wouldn’t actually do it but holy *fuck* was he *tempted*.

“I served a living god!” declared Erimond. “Bring down your blades and free me from the

physical. Glory awaits me. My master will cut off your ears and hand and hang them as his trophy!”

Lavellan didn’t humour his sad attempts to goad him. “Any protection you thought you had has been withdrawn. You will die by my hand.”

“Petty actions! Truth lies in the next world.”

Lavellan leaned forward, rested his elbows on his thighs, and smiled at him. “Pray to your so-called god when I send you there then,” he said, “so I can promptly send him to you too.”

“Empty threats.”

“It’s not a threat; it’s a promise.”

The guards escorted Erimond away to the execution stand while he screamed and carried on the whole way. Lavellan stood. The crowd in the Hall flooded outside, wanted to watch the execution or return to their duties.

Josephine shot him a concerned look. “This is your first formal execution, isn’t it?”

Not really. “Come now, don’t give me that look. I’ll be fine.”

They walked across the Hall. He spotted Solas retreating into the rotunda and Lavellan couldn’t blame him. Solas had never been the type to make a spectacle out of death sentences.

The execution stand was situated on the battlements, offering a nice view of the mountains just before your head would roll. Naturally, Lavellan had Erimond facing away from the mountains. Such a beauty was lost on him. Commander Cullen wordlessly handed him the ceremonial sword, a dragon curled around its hilt, the very sword Lavellan had raised in the name of justice.

They blindfolded Erimond and the mages held him down with a spell. He spat at them in Tevene.

Lavellan ascended the steps. He could take the head off with one strike, but maybe he could hit wrong, cause maximum pain, take at least five tries.

“The world will burn and my master will rise. We will be the mage kings beside him!” rambled Erimond. Lavellan hefted the sword over his head. “All of you will die and we will—”

Lavellan swung the sword down.

In the end, he cut Erimond’s head off in one, clean slice and that seemed to surprise everybody more than the head rolling away. Either way, he’d reached his limit at that point and just wanted the slimy bastard to shut up and fondle his balls to his god elsewhere in another world separate from Lavellan.

After the execution, he walked the battlements with Varric and Hawke.

“That was a clean execution,” noted Hawke. “Should have taken your time though. Maker knows the last person who needed mercy was him.”

“Believe me, I was tempted to not do it properly.”

When had he become so blasé about execution and killing? Had it been difficult for him the first time? Had he trembled afterwards, feeling the weight of the blood that was sticking to his palms? Or had he shrugged it off? Another necessity in the role of Inquisitor?

“Do you ever wonder if you should feel more after you kill someone?” he asked, his question carried and softened by the mountain wind.

Hawke kept her gaze ahead and whispered, “Always.”

“It’s tiring,” said Lavellan, and they stayed quiet in their agreement.

One day, his new normal would be something simple. No death, no blades, no blood. It was too much to ask for at this point, but dying from old age would be nice.

But that ending wasn’t for him.

“How’re your injuries?” he asked Hawke.

“Don’t have them.”

Varric sighed and Lavellan laughed softly.

Still, he couldn’t believe it. Hawke and Stroud were both alive and nobody was stuck in the Fade — discounting him and Solas, but that had all worked out after great emotional turmoil. As before, Hawke wanted to fight Corypheus independently. She also still had no interest in staying at Skyhold no matter how much Varric had cajoled. In the end, they’d arrived at a compromise: Hawke was to help with the Venatori and Red Templar business, especially with hunting down red lyrium smugglers since it could help determine how to handle Samson. Meanwhile, Skyhold was open to her should she wish to return. They might also cross paths if their travels and goals overlap.

“One last nag,” teased Lavellan. “Sure you don’t want to stay?”

“I’ve been on good behaviour lately. I don’t want to ruin it. But some people here... try me. Said people are important to your Inquisition.”

Lavellan looked away to hide his grimace. He suspected she was referring to Cullen.

“Where are you off to next?” he asked instead.

“Back to the Approach again. Cleaning up, keeping a close eye on the Wardens, flushing out any remaining Venatori.”

“When are you heading out?”

“Two days.” She sighed and rubbed the back of her head. “I have to go talk to Leliana about getting everything sorted, actually.” Hawke hesitated, lips pursing, and they stopped walking. “Inquisitor, I... In the Fade...” She searched for words, stance awkward, before she nodded to herself and put a firm hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. I owe you my life.”

And Hawke loathed owing anybody anything.

“You owe me nothing,” he said. “I’m just glad you’re all alright.”

Hawke eyed him as if looking for a trick, a hidden punchline, but Lavellan had none. For another

wrenching moment, he longed for the friendship and companionship they'd built up over a course of six years. Perhaps what he truly dreaded was that he would never be able to forge the friendships that had meant the world to him this time. Some friendships had arisen out of the situation that Solas had brought down upon them, so what was he sacrificing by shifting course?

"You're completely serious, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm not keeping a tally of lives, Hawke. They're not currency."

She gave him a heavy, meaningful look, the darkness in her eyes returning. "They have to be. They have to become currency. You can't keep going like this, aiming to save everyone and everything at the end of the day. This isn't how this works." The *believe me, I tried* went unspoken but it dangled overhead.

"Hawke," warned Varric.

"I know," Lavellan said softly. "We're at war, I know. I'm not trying to save everyone. I've acknowledged that there will always be loss, but I can't let the people fighting for me fade into pieces on a board or pins on a map."

She deflated at his answer. "That's incredibly exhausting. That's not sustainable."

Lavellan smiled wryly. "I know, but I'll take it over the alternative."

"Which is?"

"I told you to deploy them!" he snapped.

Cassandra hardened her features and stood her ground. "If I did, they would have died. You are not thinking clearly. We will speak of this when you have calmed."

"Something I hate," he said. *Someone* he hated. It was a fucking miracle anybody had stuck beside him at all during that first year after the Exalted Council. He'd been at his worst. A font of spitfire and paranoia and a ruthlessness that he'd promised not to succumb to.

Hawke sighed and turned away. "Either you haven't seen enough shit to think that way or you've seen enough shit that you've resolved to be like that."

Lavellan laughed humourlessly. "I wish it was the first one, believe me."

"I do." She crossed her arms and stalked off with a casual, "I'll see you two around then," thrown over her shoulder. He had no time to return the abrupt goodbye as she left him and Varric alone on the battlements.

"Sorry, she's like that," said Varric with a soft chuckle.

"It's part of her charm." He nudged Varric's shoulder. "But what about you? Everything alright?"

"I should be asking you that."

"Well, the answer is obviously no and it's going to stay that way for an awfully long time," he joked, but they both knew it rang truer than they would have liked.

Varric rubbed his face and stopped walking, leaned against a crenel along the battlement wall. His gaze focused on something in the far distance.

“I thought you and Chuckles died,” said Varric, voice breaking off into a whisper mid-sentence. “I mean, yeah, a lot of people have already died but it... It was different. Not less important. Just distant. And then I was hit with how *not* invincible we are. Terrible of me to only start caring properly when it was someone I knew, huh? You’d think I’d have learned.”

“That’s not terrible, Varric. That’s just normal.” How depressing it was that this was the normal. That it was normal to anticipate death, to be so numbed to death and killing because it was something done almost every day. “And it’s shitty that it is, but experiencing it so often just... makes you used to it.”

“You said it.” He snorted. “You think we’re ever catching a break?”

Lavellan still wondered himself. “We will. In little bits and pieces. The world sure as hell isn’t giving it to us so we have to steal some.”

“Stealing breaks for ourselves, ha! Like we’re some kind of phantom thieves of the night.”

“Roguish law flouters,” Lavellan agreed.

“Charismatic daredevils.”

“Rapscallions.”

“Rotten apple of the bunch.”

“I’m a very handsome rotting apple,” said Lavellan.

Varric nodded sagely. “You sure are.”

They shared a small laugh and watched as small patches of blue sky peered through the overcast clouds. They were easing into mid-winter so this was a little window of fair weather. It would snow again later, he was sure.

“Are you going to miss Hawke?” Lavellan asked.

“Yeah, a little.” Varric shrugged. “But I know she’ll just be unhappy here. She doesn’t do well settling in one place for too long. I don’t think... I don’t think she can.” His voice softened. “I feel like she thinks she’s letting others down if she’s not doing anything. I keep reminding her that’s not true. Maybe one day it’ll stick.”

Lavellan understood all too well.

“For now,” Varric continued, “I’m not forcing her to stay. That’s not what she needs right now.”

“You’re a good friend, Varric.”

“Am I? The Nightmare was right about one thing at least. I did this to her.”

“Hey,” said Lavellan, “no. That’s not true either. Bad things sometimes happen for no reason. It isn’t anybody’s fault.”

“Sometimes you need something to blame.”

“Why don’t we blame the years of corruption that broiled in the closed pot that is Kirkwall?”

“Too vague.”

“Fine,” he grunted. “Blame the architecture.”

Varric opened his mouth to argue, paused, then closed it with a considering hum. He laughed in mild disbelief. “You know what? Fine by me. Bad things happened because Kirkwall had shitty buildings. Orlais better watch out.”

“Isn’t there an assassination plot against the Empress?”

“It’s all coming together, Inquisitor. It’s all coming together.”

Lavellan’s feet dragged behind him after he left the War Room, mulling over the two letters in his hand. One from his Keeper, the other from Lady Guinevere. He needed an answer to give the advisors for when they reconvene tomorrow morning.

His feet led him to the rotunda, where Solas was busy painting over the section of wet plaster he’d spread for the day. Lavellan murmured a greeting and Solas tilted his head in acknowledgement. He eyed Solas’ current progress. He was working on the Grey Warden’s crest at the moment, paint still translucent, but it would dry into its vivid colours later. Painting the murals involved such a complex process, which required patience and finesse. Solas had both. His brushstrokes were precise, confident, swift. A race before the plaster could dry.

“Going well?” asked Lavellan.

Solas hummed in affirmation, fingers speckled with dried plaster and a mix of powdered pigments. He smoothly changed brushes when needed, called the instruments with a flick of his wrist and they would come flying into his waiting hands, haloed green with his magic. It was a mesmerising process to watch.

“Did you get your staff replaced?” Lavellan asked.

“Dorian lent me an old staff. It should suffice for now.”

“I know staffs act as a focusing and channelling instrument, but do you feel a difference between each staff? Is there some sort of compatibility issue there?” Lavellan settled himself into the chair. The tension from Adamant had faded between them, and he suspected that Solas had received just as much peace of mind as he had after they’d struck their deal.

Solas looked at him over his shoulder and smiled at the question. “There is. Of course, a staff is a staff just as a cup is a cup. They will serve the same function.”

“But cups come in different designs and make. You’re bound to like one type or types over others.”

“And you can drink better from one than another,” he agreed. “In this case, assume Dorian and I have overlapping preferences in our cups.”

Lavellan hummed and laid the two letters on the table, stared at them for an awfully long time. The death of the Venatori advisor had stirred the nobles into blaming games, ready to hunt the elves. For *sport*. The lyrium withdrawals from Wycome’s population also wasn’t helping, and it wasn’t hard for him to envision the ease in which they could be convinced to commence lynching.

Leliana had suggested sneaking the elves in. Cullen had suggested sending forces lest the elves and his clan be killed. Lavellan had suggested taking a break because he'd had a blinding headache.

No notes from Ellana, either. Lavellan wasn't sure if that was a source of worry.

Someone placed a plate of food in front of him. Lavellan stared at it, then up at Solas, who was already wiping his hands clean.

"You have not eaten dinner, I hear," said Solas. "And it is already close to midnight."

"You're done already?"

Solas' lips twitched. "Inquisitor... It has been almost an hour."

"What?" Lavellan blinked. "No, that can't be right, I just sat down."

"Then you've sat down for a very long time."

Lavellan leaned back and rubbed his eyes. Good gods, he hadn't realised. How long did one person need to agonise over the fate of his entire family?

"I don't know if I can eat. The worry has chased my appetite away."

"Your clan?"

He nodded. Solas stood beside him and gestured at the letters.

"May I?" he asked. Lavellan let him read them.

"They're in immediate danger," Lavellan explained. "Leliana suggested sneaking them into the city, Cullen thinks we need to send forces."

"That does seem to be the Commander's usual," Solas said and Lavellan smiled. "What is dividing your choice?"

"Lady Guinevere is warning against sending a force, but... If I wait too long— I don't know, Solas. It's not just my clan. The elves in the alienage are in danger too, and I had the lyrium removed from the well so everyone in Wycome is suffering from withdrawal." Lavellan wrung his fingers. He didn't want to make another panic-driven choice that would cost the elves their lives. Or worse. What if the calculated decision he made was the one that led to ruin? "The nobles are also unimpressed after the Venatori advisor's... unfortunate fate."

Solas hummed, studied the letters once more, then put them down.

"If I might make a suggestion?" he offered.

"I would appreciate it."

"I would heed Lady Guinevere's hidden wisdom. I know you are hesitant because they are important to you, but it would be a mistake to act in haste now. You would undo the efforts your patience has wrought. I suspect, even under the effects of red lyrium, that Wycome would have a significant standing army. Sending in forces would result in being unheard at best or embroiling the city within battle at worst."

Maybe, but...

“And perhaps,” Solas continued, “the people of Wycome could be... convinced that the Dalish are not so terrible. You know well that those in power are empowered yet bound by their role.” Lavellan glanced at Solas, but his gaze was faraway. “If the people banded together and declared themselves louder than the collective nobility...”

He caught on. “The nobility has to back off.”

“You’ve exploited this before. With the Chantry.”

“In my defence, they were getting aggravating and were just generally being unhelpful when they were most needed.”

“I was not criticising it, lethallin.”

Lavellan quieted, bounced his leg to rid himself of his excess restlessness. How could the people of Wycome be convinced then? Could the Dalish trade goods...? Could the Inquisition bribe...? Or... no. Right now, the people of Wycome would be feeling too rotten to worry about trade or money, and if they do consider the money, then it would be for things such as medicine—

Medicine! Healing!

“The Keeper and my sister can help with easing withdrawal symptoms.” He slowly brightened. Yes, that was a good start. “Pain can make a person do regrettable things, and if it is eased...”

Solas nodded. “It appears you have your answer.”

He barked out a harsh laugh. “Oh Solas, I never do. A possible solution, maybe. Not an answer. Never an answer.”

“No?”

“No.” Lavellan folded the letters. “I am wary of answers. They’re simply questions in disguise.”

“Ah. A phenomenon which plagues even the brightest scholars and philosophers.” He pushed the plate towards Lavellan, still steaming and warm. “Eat.”

“Have *you* eaten?”

“I eat on a more regular basis than you, at any rate.”

“Not an answer.”

“Answers are questions in disguise.”

“You’re annoying.”

Solas laughed faintly and gestured at the plate once more. “Will I have to ask again or must I spoon feed you like the child you adamantly try to be?”

“Look who’s talking.” Lavellan rolled his eyes but pulled the plate closer anyway and offered the bread to Solas.

“I’m alright, thank—”

Solas’ stomach rumbled.

Lavellan cut the bread, filled it with meat and vegetables, and shoved it into Solas' hands.

"I won't eat if you won't," Lavellan huffed.

"Petulant man."

"Stubborn fool."

They ate, still smiling softly, relishing the quiet.

Lavellan liked the night, liked the quiet while everyone lay dreaming or sleeping as he roamed, or haunted, as Varric liked to say. Haunted Skyhold. Its sentinel, never at rest.

"You know, Solas," he started, "for someone who likes dreaming, you sleep less than I thought."

Solas had long since finished his food and was just content to remain with him. Lavellan was unsure about what to do with that information.

"I lose track of time when I paint. The penalty of being engrossed in one's craft, I suppose."

Lavellan nodded. He was the same with his whittling, and speaking of, he was almost done with everyone's pieces, only had Blackwall's left to finish. Although, he was still undecided on what animal to carve for Cole.

Cole. Gentle Cole. Helpful Cole.

Cole, who'd shed Cole and had returned to being Compassion. Compassion, who was Cole, who materialised on the table in front of Lavellan in coils of smoke, crouching, feet deftly poised on unoccupied spaces so as to not step on any paper. Lavellan ate the last of his food and dusted his hands off on the plate.

"Hello, Cole," he said. "What brings you here?"

"Tight and terrible, twisting into the worst parts of me when they pull. I can't," he gasped, looked at Solas with wide, fearful eyes. "I don't want to."

Solas and Lavellan shared a look.

"Is everything alright, Cole?" Solas asked.

"No!" he cried. "I help, it's who I am. But they can take it. Blocked, bleeding, walls around what I want. Make me monstrous. But you! You can help it! Stop it! Stop me! Bind me!"

Solas stilled. Lavellan felt the bottom drop from his stomach.

"I beg your pardon?" Solas asked.

Cole jumped off the desk and paced the rotunda, agitation laced within every frantic step. He held himself as if he were a shattered vase held together by a fraying string.

"I want you to bind me," he told Solas. "So that they can't get me. They can't make me *wrong*."

Solas' jaw tightened and he bit out, "No."

Cole's expression fell and he approached Solas, hands grasping at his robes in desperation and a touch of frustration. "But you like demons!"

“I enjoy the company of spirits, yes, which is why I do not abuse them with bindings!”

“It’s not abuse if I ask.”

“Not always true,” he murmured, gently extricated himself from Cole's hold. “And I do not practice blood magic, which renders this entire conversation academical.”

Cole turned to Lavellan. “He won’t bind me!” It felt a little like a child turning to their parent after the other one had told them no. Lavellan stood, felt awkward just sitting there and staring up at them.

“Why do you want to be bound?” he asked.

“So I’m *safe*,” he choked out and returned to his furious pacing and muttering. “If he won’t, then someone else can! Will! A Grey Warden mage and then... No twisting, no pulling. Me. Only me, and not what I shouldn’t be.”

“Cole.” Lavellan approached him with care. “A blood mage can bind anybody. Spirit or human.”

“Then you should ask Solas to bind you! And then someone can bind him!” Lavellan froze at that, felt a gashing crawl of discomfort and utter *rejection* of that notion, but he wasn’t sure which part of Cole’s suggestion disagreed with him the most. Solas stood beside Lavellan. His presence relieved the discomfort, somewhat.

“What if binding erases your mind? Your consciousness?” Solas challenged.

Cole shook his head vehemently. “You wouldn’t make me hurt innocent people. I don’t want to do that again.”

“No,” Lavellan agreed and crossed his arms, “but there has to be a middle ground between ‘do nothing’ and ‘bind Cole with blood magic.’”

“Indeed,” said Solas and he fell quiet in thought. Cole and Lavellan looked at him. “I recall Rivaini seers using talismans to protect spirits they summoned from rival mages. The Amulet of the Unbound would make a spirit immune to blood magic and binding.” He looked up and stared at Cole. “It should work with you as well.”

“I’m sure Josephine has contacts within Rivain,” Lavellan said. “We can dedicate a few resources to search for it.”

“Good,” Cole said darkly and stalked off, his shoulders tensed. “They will not take me.”

He disappeared in a curl of smoke and shadows, left Solas and Lavellan in the now uneasy quiet. Lavellan’s mouth twisted in discomfort as he stared at the space Cole used to occupy.

“He helps everyone but who helps him?” he wondered. Solas glanced at him, then at the very spot Lavellan was staring at.

“Us.”

Cole really went, "Daaad, my other dad won't bind me with blood magic!"

Salty that you can't choose forgiveness for Ser Ruth unless you're a faithful Inquisitor. Wow, new throne though. Not quite on the same level of intimidating and size as that one Qunari bench (we all know the one), but def comes close.

That which binds us

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint reminder! If you've been reading for a bit, here's a reminder to walk, stretch, drink water, eat food, or sleep if you're able :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

that which holds me—

“Sneak them in,” he told Leliana upon the commencement of the War Council. “I also have a letter for my Keeper.” She nodded as she took it. He turned to Josephine. “Do you have any contacts in Rivain?”

“Yes,” she said. “What for?”

“The binding of demons at Adamant has shaken Cole. He wishes to be bound to Solas in the hopes of preventing that, but... that’s not exactly ideal. For Solas or him. Solas spoke of an Amulet of the Unbound that Rivaini seers would use to protect spirits from rival mages. I thought we could perhaps obtain one?”

She looked down at her board and made a note. “I will look into it, Inquisitor.”

“Thank you. So then, how goes our progress with Halamshiral?”

The three advisors stared at one another.

“What?” he asked.

“We have been approached,” said Leliana. “And if we are to accept, we would have our guarantee into the Grand Masquerade.”

He eyed them. “But?”

“You’ve, ah, been vocal during your lessons with me,” said Josephine carefully, “about your... predisposition towards Grand Duke Gaspard.”

“That he’s a bigoted, racist warmonger?” he said dryly.

Cullen coughed into his hand.

“That,” said Josephine. “Our invitation is from him. Will that be a problem?”

He laughed. “Jo, I may dislike him, but I am not about to turn this opportunity down.”

“Please do not repeat what you have said to me to him,” she said.

“That would depend on his behaviour.”

“*Inquisitor.*”

“I’m joking.” Partly. “I’m an idiot, not socially suicidal.”

Lavellan gazed at the pins scattered on the map. Their influence. Growth in power and reach. The Inquisition was everywhere as a sharp steel, a whispered shadow, or a silver tongue. Something almost pleased blossomed in his chest. Look at the change and waves they were making, how one tip of their hand could upend a shore, how a secret smile could spill the blood of the stars.

“We’re doing well,” he said out of the blue. “Look at this. We’re all over the map. Like pests.”

“Very efficient pests,” said Leliana with a faint smile.

“Very skilled pests,” said Josephine.

“Maker, you’re all impossible,” sighed Cullen. “I am outnumbered in this room.”

Lavellan's gaze returned to the Dales. When he looked up to continue their discussion, it was to Leliana’s astute gaze pinning him.

“Is there a reason you keep looking at the Dales?” she asked.

He gave her a wry smile. “I *am* Dalish.”

She raised a brow. He sighed and leaned on the table.

“It’s where the civil war has been raging, isn’t it?” he asked. “I’m just wondering about its state since the peace talks have been scheduled.”

Leliana stared at him for a long moment, then she held her hands behind her back. “About that,” she said. “The Imperial Army forces have been silent ever since they withdrew to await the outcomes of the peace talk. What this bodes, I do not yet know.”

“We can march soldiers into the Exalted Plains,” suggested Cullen. He seemed paler this morning. “Position scouts in strategic areas. Lines of communication are down so we need to be prepared for anything.”

There it was — his opening to the Dales.

He wasn’t sure if he was up to seeing the razed battlefield once again, but he needed answers. There was a Dalish clan there too, wasn't there? A part of him — okay, most of him — was getting ridiculously homesick, and he just... wanted to see the aravel sails again. The halla and the hunting and the simpler, albeit tough life. Well, tough in a different way to his job as Inquisitor.

Honestly, this whole Inquisition gig was more of a garbage pile on fire.

He meant that lovingly.

That afternoon, Cullen finally confided in him about his lyrium withdrawal. They sat in Cullen’s office, passed stories until dusk, and if any tears were shed, it was nobody else’s business.

The wooden carvings Lavellan had finished for his companions sat arrayed on his bed. He twisted his lips, shuffled his feet, scratched the back of his head, paced and made indecisive noises. Would they like it? Maybe they wouldn't like the animal Lavellan had chosen for them? What if it looked bad? What if they accept it out of politeness but secretly hate it?

Oh just give it to them!

Lavellan grumbled and swept them into a sack with care. Now or never. So then, who first?

Not even a question. The one who began the Inquisition. The one who'd stayed beside him from the beginning to the very end.

The very end.

He descended the Keep and entered the armoury where Cassandra usually spent her mornings, the smell of sword oil and metal heavy in the air. The workers greeted him as he passed and Lavellan spent a moment admiring the line of daggers, then ascended to the highest floor, where a lone table rested by a window overlooking the front bailey.

There Cassandra was. And, surprisingly, Varric.

"That is not what happened," huffed Cassandra.

"Well, it kind of did," said Varric.

"Like when the Iron Bull ripped his shirt off to intimidate the Nightmare? Never mind that he does not wear shirts?"

"Artistic license."

Cassandra scowled further, scratching away at the parchment. "This is supposed to be an account, Varric. A fragment of history, so that rumours are not spread."

"A finished draft is only half the story, Seeker. It's the rumours that make it whole."

Lavellan's gaze softened at the sight. They'd reconciled somewhat, it seemed.

Varric stole glances at Cassandra as she passed, his pen stalling over the parchment, and the ink would blot over his written words, but he never seemed to mind. He would stare at the blot, shrug, and say, "You're right, that's not it." Then he would begin anew. Lavellan wasn't sure what was warranting such a prolific consumption of parchment. For the weeks they'd stayed at Lavellan's estate in Kirkwall, Varric had agonised over his work. He'd spent more time in Lavellan's estate than his own, had often ignored the paperwork required of the Viscount in favour of whatever magnum opus he seemed to be in the middle of composing, to the chagrin of his seneschal.

And then...

And then.

He left it on the bench where Cassandra usually read her books, the parchment wrapped around a handpicked bundle of her favourite flowers.

Oh.

Oh!

“Ugh,” groaned Cassandra and muttered at her work. “Written like a dim-witted child.”

“It’s not as bad as you think,” said Varric, a faint smile in his voice.

“Don’t patronise me.”

“I’m not. Here, it’s a bit choppy though. You don’t have to make them too long or cram so many ideas together. You’ve got all this space, Seeker. No rush.”

She huffed again, but it was less frustrated. “I cannot put into words the visions of the Fade. It was so....”

“Green,” agreed Varric.

Lavellan was content to stay quiet and listen in on their quiet conversation, but Varric looked up and his expression brightened.

“Inquisitor!” he greeted. “What brings you here?”

“Looking for you both. What’re you two up to?”

Cassandra put the quill down. “One day, historians will ask what happened at Adamant, in the Fade. I was there. I have a responsibility to provide an account so that nobody twists our legacy and our efforts.” She sent Varric a disgruntled look. “I asked Varric for help since writing does not come naturally to me.”

“Glad to be of assistance,” said Varric with a theatrical bow.

Lavellan’s lips twitched, observed the two of them, and never in his life would he have expected them to get together in his past life. Timeline. Should he start calling it a timeline instead of life? Anyway, he supposed he could see it.

Right now, Varric still loved the namesake of his crossbow.

“So, Inquisitorialness,” said Varric. “What’s in the mysterious looking sack?”

“Oh.” Lavellan held it close to his chest, shuffled his feet. “They’re presents that I made. For a few people. Including, uh. You two.”

Cassandra smiled. “Truly?” she asked. “That is very thoughtful of you, thank you.”

“You know, Glow, you’re starting to make me double think about how I’ve been writing you in my book.”

He frowned. “Why? How did you write me?”

“A jaded, burdened elf who sets himself on fire and champions the people with a hidden agenda.”

“It’s not wrong.”

“No, no, I’m changing it. The Inquisitor liked to appear scary but really, he’s just a sap at heart.”

“Do you want your damn present or not?”

Varric chuckled and raised his arms in surrender. Lavellan shook his head with a smile and gingerly picked up Varric's piece, hesitated, before he pulled it out and presented it. A soft breath escaped Varric as he took and examined it with wide and wondered eyes.

"You told me to indulge in my hobbies so, uh, yeah. There you go." Inquisitor Lavellan, the man who'd publicly exposed Grand Duchess Florianne through words alone and had learned the silver-tongued ways from Josephine Montilyet herself, was stumbling over his sentences.

"You *made* this?" Varric asked, pitch rising in disbelief. "Carved it by *hand* and everything?"

"Sometimes, I did it by foot."

"Very funny, Inquisitor."

It was a fox mid-trot with a mischievous expression as it carried a quill in its mouth, carved from cherry wood, which gave it that wonderful, deep red stain. The entire piece was just under the size of his palms, dangling from the braided strings looped around the small ring Lavellan had carved over its back.

"Shit, you even carved the fur? How long did this take?"

"I don't remember, but all in all, I finished everyone's in two months." He turned to Cassandra and gave her the bear. The wood was lighter in colour, a Great Bear walking, the vague shape of the all-seeing eye and the Chantry sunrays arching around and over it. The braided string was wrapped around the middle space between two sun rays. This one was almost as large as his hand. Mostly due to the sun.

She took it as if he'd bestowed upon her a babe.

"Inquisitor, I— This is— This is wonderful." She looked up, smile growing. "I will cherish this."

"Do you two... like it?" he asked them

"Like it?" asked Varric. "Glowy, I think I'm going to cry. You *made* this. For us. Even after we made you run naked on the battlements a few days ago after that game of Wicked Grace."

Lavellan snorted out a laugh and pulled a face at the memory. He'd lost against Solas. Enough said. "Maybe they're secretly tiny bombs."

"Tiny bombs of love. Look at this, Seeker! He's got the expression down and everything!"

"It does look like you," she agreed.

A too-clever fox for too-clever Varric. Always up to something, always something witty on his mind. But foxes were also excellent parents and Varric had always had that parental air around him, urging Lavellan to take care of himself, would subtly do it himself if Lavellan was being stubborn about it. He was like that to Cole too.

A bear for Cassandra. Strong, formidable, protective of its young, and they both defended with everything they had. Steadfast, stubborn, shook the battlefield whenever she'd roar. The sun and the all-seeing eye to symbolise her faith in the Maker and devotion to her Order.

"You really like them?" he asked again.

"Inquisitor, I am going to carry it with me at all times," said Varric, fiddling with the braided

string. "It's what this is for, right?"

He smiled. "You don't have to."

"I will."

Cassandra ran gentle fingers over the arch of the eye. "I meant it, Inquisitor," she murmured, eyes glimmering. "I will forever cherish this."

Lavellan glowed from relief and pride.

His raven joined him halfway through his search for Bull. He smiled at her.

"Hello love," he said. "What have you been up to?"

She cawed and nuzzled into his jaw.

"Well I'm giving some of my friends presents," he said. "I'm looking for the Iron Bull but I can't seem to find him."

"Bull," she cawed and took flight. "Bull, Bull!"

"You know where he is?"

"Know where he is," she repeated. Lavellan raised a brow and decided to test it.

"Alright, lead the way."

Did she really understand? At this point, he should stop questioning it since she'd proven her intelligence thrice over.

He followed her to the rear bailey, where it felt as if he'd stepped into another world because of the stark difference in architecture. The builders had restored the area wonderfully. There was some work left, the sound of construction still raging, but they'd set up the brewery, the greater kitchen, and appropriate storage. Most of the apartments stood ready to receive numerous inhabitants as well.

The Templars and mages had to be separated though. Both groups had kicked up a mighty fuss about being so close to each other and Lavellan had swept in with the suggestion before Cassandra and Vivienne could kick them both out into the snow.

Lavellan hadn't had time to come down and help lately. Not that he could, much. They'd always wave him off or grow frightened because they'd take his presence to mean displeasure in their work.

He spotted Grand Enchanter Fiona in the small garden sitting with a group of children and young adolescents, book open on her lap. Teaching, perhaps?

"Bull!" Lavellan's raven crowed. Good gods, she needed a name. Why was he so terrible at naming?

Sure enough, Bull was by the greater kitchen, chatting to a few workers with sacks of flour heaped over his shoulders. He offloaded them and parted with a cheery wave goodbye. His gaze fell on Lavellan and he grinned.

“Mercy!” he greeted. “Morning.”

“Morning, Bull.” His raven returned to his shoulders and puffed her feathers as if to say, *I told you so*.

“Mayhem,” Bull said and nodded at the raven.

“Bull!” she said.

Mayhem. Elegant mayhem, Leliana had said.

The idea struck him.

Elegant mayhem. What was that in Elvish? *Galanor veredhe*. Verenor? No, not quite... Galaver? No still not—

Vergala.

The name settled in his head, a drop of water falling into the calm sea, and his eyes brightened.

He exclaimed out of the blue and startled Bull. Lavellan grabbed his raven off his shoulders and looked her in the eye. “Vergala!” he rejoiced. “Your name is Vergala!” He hugged her and she squawked but didn’t struggle. “Vergala! It sounds right! Vergala!”

“Vergala!” she repeated and he had no idea if ravens could sound pleased, but she definitely sounded it. When he let her go, she perched on his shoulders again, puffed her chest out and cawed, “Vergala. Lavellan. My name.”

“That’s right, clever girl. That’s your name.”

“Clever Vergala.” She took off and flew in circles over him. “Lavellan!”

He cackled in glee and spun with her, and only returned to present when the wooden carvings hit one another in the sack. Lavellan stopped. Bull watched him with a smile that one wore when confronted by the sight of a dog chasing its tail. Lavellan recomposed himself, cleared his throat. A few passers-by shot him amused glances, and even Vergala seemed embarrassed since she returned to his shoulder with a more subdued caw.

“So, finally named her?” asked Bull.

“Ah, yeah, just then. Listen, never tell anybody I did that.”

“Did what?”

“Good.” Lavellan laughed breathlessly. “I was looking for you, actually. I... made a present for my friends and, well—” He dug into the sack before he could lose his words again, and took out Bull’s carving. “I made this. I hope you like it. Belated Satinalia?”

Bull’s eye lit up like a pyromaniac child who’d made something explode for the first time.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled as he gratefully accepted it. Bull had been easy. Lavellan had known what to do for him immediately. “It’s a fucking dragon! Mercy, you’re the best. It’s got my horns!”

It was indeed a dragon, but Lavellan had shaped its horns to resemble Bull's. The Iron Dragon. Dragon Bull? Lavellan grinned and shuffled in slight embarrassment as Bull waved it around and yelled, "It's a tiny fucking dragon!" for all of the rear bailey to hear. Fiona shot him a disgruntled look as the children stared wide-eyed.

"Best. Inquisitor. Ever!"

He ran into Blackwall and Josephine chatting on the battlements. Lavellan cleared his throat. Blackwall started and Josephine moved to hide something behind her back as they stared at him.

"Inquisitor!" Josephine squeaked. "What a pleasant surprise to see you here!"

Lavellan's lips quirked. "I *do* live here."

"Yes, that is to say, here. Specifically. Atop the battlements."

Blackwall stayed quiet, face reddening, looking like someone had sprinted past and pulled his pants down. Lavellan laughed.

"Creators, you two look like I've caught you in the middle of sex, calm down."

"Inquisitor!" Josephine admonished.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop," he said with a chuckle. "I've a little something for you both. Made them in my spare time."

That caught their attention. Lavellan picked out Josephine's and gave it to her. She gasped and accepted it with cupped palms, turning it over in her hands. (Lavellan squinted. What had she hidden behind her back and where had it gone?) He'd carved an elephant for her. Gentle, majestic creatures native to Par Vollen, known for their intelligence and compassion. He explained as much. She traced her fingers over the wrinkles in the skin, the cheerful expression on its face as it raised its trunk high in celebration.

"Inquisitor, this is beautiful," she gushed. "Such craftsmanship!"

He smiled. "I'm glad you like it." He turned to Blackwall and picked his out. "I considered giving you a griffon because Grey Warden, but you know what?" He placed the phoenix in Blackwall's hand. "Being a Warden is not what defines you. You are defined by your actions, and whatever happened in your past, whatever mistakes you've made, you want to move forward and make the world a better place. That is what I admire about you, Blackwall. And so, a phoenix. Symbolic of rebirth in Rivaini legends."

His piece was somewhat flat, the flames from its tails and wings extending and connecting to form a ring of fire. Blackwall looked up at him, eyes fogging with unshed tears, and his mouth twisted as he struggled for his words.

"I don't deserve this," was what he ended up saying.

"Blackwall, this isn't about deserving. You've earned this. Earned my respect. The actions you've done, the help you've given, the resilience and courage you've shown?" He smiled. "Consider it a

reminder. I believe you are a better man than you give yourself credit for.”

He shook his head. “Inquisitor, I— I am not worthy of your respect.”

Lavellan watched him, his head bent down, shoulders hunched under the weight of his sins.

“Look up,” he ordered.

Blackwall tilted his head up. Lavellan softened his tone and expression.

“Stand tall.”

It took him a while, but he did so and pulled his shoulders back, chin up. Lavellan nodded with a smile.

“There. Maybe you’re not a good man, Blackwall, hell I’m hardly one,” he said, momentarily lapsing back into the memories of fire and wrath and apathy and playing with lives. Blackwall opened his mouth to argue but Lavellan shook his head emphatically. “But all we can do is try. Try to be better than we were. Try to own up to our mistakes and learn and atone but never wallow to the point of inaction. Anytime you waver or question yourself, use that as a reminder.” He grinned. “Sometimes all a person needs is someone who believes in them. And we believe in you.”

Josephine clutched the small elephant close to her chest and laid a gentle hand on Blackwall’s shoulders, gave him an encouraging nod and a soft smile. Blackwall smiled back. He looked at Lavellan with a thousand words unsaid swimming in his teary eyes.

“Thank you, Inquisitor. I will always remember your words. And no matter what you say, I believe you are a good man.”

His eyes saddened. “Thank you.”

He ducked into the tavern and swung by Sera’s little alcove and bay window. All her knickknacks decorated the place, incongruous and yet so colourful and wild and very Sera.

“Ser Lordybloomers,” she greeted, imitating a pompous voice, and smiled. “Good seeing you, yeah? What’s up?”

“Wanted to give you something. Made it for you.”

She perked up. “Oh yeah? Can I throw it at people? Got a few nobs who needs a good pie to the face. That, or bees.”

“Close enough to bees but try not to throw it at anything.” Lavellan revealed the wooden carving. A flat hexagon with its surface carved to look like a honeycomb, a bee resting on it. On the edge of the hexagon was a wasp. He dangled it in front of her and she gasped, squealed and grabbed it.

“Honey and stingy!” she exclaimed and giggled.

“Just like you,” he agreed.

“Aww, look at you. Try to be all tough and mean but you got a pushy belly.”

“Pushy belly.”

“All soft and squishy.” She hopped off her window-sill seat and dug around her hoard, pulling out her quiver so she could wrap the string around it. Sera patted it with a smile. “Never gotten a hand-made gift before,” she admitted. “Thanks, Quizzy.”

“Really?”

“Well, no, some sniffy kid gave me a painted box and got snot all over it. I never got a *nice* hand-made gift before. You’re golden. Hey, you up for a round of pranks?”

Lavellan paused, considered, then asked, “Pies?”

Sera cackled. “Pies!”

It was noon by the time he and Sera had stopped throwing pies at people — not that anyone had known it was them — and Lavellan cleaned himself up, then went out on his search once more. Vergala flew off during the pie-throwing to get out of range.

He found Cullen and Leliana in the garden playing chess.

“Don’t think I didn’t see that,” Cullen told Leliana.

“Such accusations, Commander,” she replied.

Lavellan made to move towards them, but for a dizzying second, his vision pulsed. Skyhold garden shifted, overlaying with the ancient garden of Tarasyl'an. The taste of magic lingered on his lips, sweet lightning, honeyed metal, and he clutched at his head, but then, it was gone. He blinked, dazed. Everything was as it was: his progressing herb garden, the asters, the winterbells, paths made of stone and not golden tiles.

What the hell?

“Inquisitor,” greeted Cullen and gestured him over, which snapped him out of it.

“How goes the game?” he asked to distract himself.

Cullen reclined like a cat who'd succeeded in pushing everything off any available surface. “I won, despite her cheating.”

“I did no such thing,” Leliana said and stood. “Be careful, Commander. I am *very* good at exacting revenge.”

“Like when you moved your knight to F5?” he taunted.

“Perhaps,” she said.

“Wait, before you go,” said Lavellan and opened the sack. “I’ve made something for you two. As a thank-you present of sorts.”

He took out the nightingale carving and gave it to Leliana. The wood was dark, and the nightingale

was mid-flight, an arrow clutched in one of its feet, laurel leaves clutched in the other.

“Oh,” she breathed, eyes glittering. “This is magnificent. You made this?”

Lavellan nodded with a smile. “A nightingale for our nightingale. She clutches an arrow in one hand, swift with her judgement and skill. And the other...”

“Laurel leaves. Symbols of peace.” She looked up at him, smiled wryly. “Are you trying to tell me something, Inquisitor?”

“Just a reminder,” he said, didn’t elaborate because he knew she understood. He turned to Cullen, who was watching the exchange with a small smile, and started when Lavellan presented him with the lion. Not the lions of Orlais. The Valmont lions were poised, regal, clean-cut. No, his lion was a fighter, proud and fierce, its mane reminiscent of the mantle of fur over Cullen’s shoulder, a broken chain in its mouth to signify Cullen breaking away from lyrium.

“Maker, is that why you’ve been staring at the fur around my shoulders?” Cullen asked and laughed gently, gaze soft as he traced his fingers over the broken chain. “How did you—?”

“With a lot of wrist aches,” said Lavellan. “But it was worth it. I know the lion is an Orlesian symbol, but, I mean, it’s native to East Thedas.”

“I don’t know how you did it, but it doesn’t... It’s not like that at all.”

“It screams Fereldan, somehow,” said Leliana in mild surprise.

“I’m bringing it to that cursed masquerade,” Cullen declared.

The three of them shared a laugh.

“I hear you’ve been giving gifts!” Dorian chirped when Lavellan swung by the library, but he entered through the door and not through the rotunda. He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to leave Solas for last. Speaking of, there was Solas, high on his scaffolding as he worked on the fresco, kneeling so he wouldn’t hit his head on the library’s railings. All the way across the room though.

Dorian cleared his throat, smile teasing. “At least make the effort to hide that you’re looking.”

Lavellan ignored the comment. “Yes, I’ve been giving gifts. I couldn’t quite finish them in time for Satinalia so they’re a little late.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be the one giving *you* presents?” Dorian asked. “You’re off running around and checking on your little ducklings. You should be resting, being hand-fed grapes, surrounded by a platter of the finest cheese with a glass of wine in your hand.”

He snorted and laughed at the mental image. “Are you volunteering to hand-feed me grapes?”

“I would, if I didn’t suspect that you’d try to bite my finger off.”

“Now, what makes you say that?” He took out Dorian’s piece. Dorian’s joking expression vanished, replaced by something almost hesitant.

“Wait, you were serious?” he asked.

Lavellan frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be? You’re my friend, Dorian.” A good friend. Dorian, who’d pushed on despite the prolonged lack of sleep, pale and weak and reduced to a gaunt version of himself. Barely had any muscle, cheeks sunken, halfway to death, unable to concentrate for long, and yet he’d yelled at Solas on Lavellan’s behalf, had fought beside him even if his reactions had been slowed, even if he’d been struggling, even if his mana stores had been low because of his constant use of magic to sustain himself. He’d done so damn well.

In the end, he’d collapsed on the battlefield. Had used up what mana he had left to deflect a magical spell from the opposition, which had saved so many soldiers. Including Lavellan.

“Hush Dorian. Rest now,” he whispered. There was no waiting in war, in battle, but Lavellan would make the world wait. He grasped Dorian’s thin hands. “You did well. You did good. Thank you so much, you don’t know how much—” Lavellan’s breaths caught and he choked on his suppressed sobs.

Dorian patted his hand with a brittle smile. “You are my dearest friend, Mahanon, but don’t follow me just yet, yes?”

He placed the ouroboros in Dorian’s hand.

“How ominous,” Dorian said, tried to be teasing, but his voice cracked.

“The snake is a symbol of Tevinter, but a snake eating its own self is a cycle of birth and death.” He placed his hand on Dorian’s shoulder. “You, who loves your homeland so much, and because you love it, you want to change it. It’s not going to be easy. You’ll be met with so much opposition, but whenever you falter, I hope this reminds you to keep fighting. Tevinter can change.” He offered him a smile. “Starting with you.”

Dorian let out a shaky laugh. “Maker, you’ll make me cry. This is... a very thoughtful present. I didn’t think I would make any friends here, but you— Well, in any case, thank you.”

Lavellan’s heart soared. So far, the reactions he’d gotten had been sincere and he hadn’t sensed a single, forced politeness.

“Alright, I have a few more to go,” said Lavellan and grinned. “I’ll see you around, alright?”

He nodded, clutched the ouroboros and held it close to him.

Vivienne was on her lounge on the balcony overlooking the Hall. She looked up from her book and closed it upon his approach, put it aside.

“Hello, darling,” she said. “May I help you?”

He nodded at her with a careful smile. “I have something for you.”

“Oh?” She patted the space next to her and he sat.

For Vivienne, he wasn’t sure if she would appreciate handcrafted items, but Lavellan knew she adored ornamented belongings so this was the most detailed of his pieces. He picked hers out.

“I made it as a present. To show my appreciation for all the help and assistance you’ve given.”

Her brows raised. As if the concept were foreign to her. He wasn’t sure which part of his sentence was the foreign concept.

The carved swan was all sweeping curves and sharp angles, each feather on its spread wings carved with painstaking detail. It was a graceful animal. Beautiful, but should be admired from afar because it could get vicious and aggressive when angered or disturbed, and at his explanation, Vivienne smiled in delight, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Such detail,” she praised. “You have a gift, darling. Wonderfully cultivated and executed, and I may know nothing about wood carving, but the precision and delicacy is commendable.”

“I, ah, enjoy detail work. Yours is probably the most detailed of the set.”

She raised a brow. “Is that so? How come?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you, I suppose.”

Vivienne sighed and cupped his cheek with her hand. “My dear, I could never be disappointed with a well-thought-out present. Your care is apparent in the work. You could sell what you make. It would certainly earn a fortune.”

“In the future, maybe,” he said, recalled the times he’d sold his carvings whenever their clan had traded with the human settlements. *Dalish* crafts earned much. Exotic, they’d said. Lavellan had scoffed then but money was money. Besides, better for them to be legitimate crafts rather than weak imitations that would trod on their culture.

“Let me know if you’re in any way unhappy with it and I’ll make a new one. Or not, if you don’t—”

“Inquisitor,” she interrupted, gentle yet firm, “if I were displeased, you certainly would have known. Take pride in your work, darling. As I said before, humility does not befit you. Your craft is your heart, your innermost person.”

She tipped his chin up with her finger.

“Bare yourself and brandish it as your strength.”

Cole was harder to track down. It was no use asking either because nobody remembered Cole for long enough save for his inner circle. Not that they’ve seen him either.

Would Cole even like what Lavellan had made?

Lavellan found himself checking down in the cells as a last resort, and almost tripped when he indeed found Cole there, sitting on the edge where stones fell into the snow. The bowels of Skyhold. Damaged from the creation of the Veil.

“He couldn’t walk far,” said Cole. “So much taken from him, so much he gave. The future will be better now.” He bowed his head, shook it. “Then it wasn’t. Roared in his despair and his hurt covered the stones and they remember it. It’s still here, his screams. Do you hear it?”

And Lavellan could, for a second. No, not even. Half of a second, but he was unsure whether he'd imagined it or not.

"I don't think so. Maybe. I'm not sure," he said and sat beside Cole. "How are you feeling, Cole?"

He fiddled with his sleeves, pulled them over his fingers. "I'll be better when I can't hurt anyone. When nobody can make me hurt anyone. You'll kill me if I do, right? Promise you'll kill me."

Lavellan gave him a grave stare. "I won't let it come to that first, but if all else fails... I will."

Cole closed his eyes, bowed his head, shoulders relaxing.

"Thank you," he said.

"That's the last resort of the last resorts though," said Lavellan with a weak laugh. "In any case, I have something for you."

He tilted his head at Lavellan. "Shaking fingers, painful wrists, can't hold the daggers right the next morning. I hope they like it. Don't want to lose myself again." Cole blinked up at him.

"That's how you bind yourself," he said as if he'd come across a wondrous revelation. "You don't need magic because you have them and you know they'll bring you back."

Lavellan lowered his gaze, understood Cole and his wishes to not lose himself, to remain as he was, to not hurt others, to not achieve what they were seeking by damaging those around them.

"Blood always in your mouth and embers flying free in your fury. Your words lace with poison. Trapped in the stillness so you change it yourself but when you do it, it's chaos and you like it, liked it, *what if I become like that again?*" Cole shook his head. "No, you won't. I won't let you, just like you won't let me. You were hurt, twisted, turned into something that terrified you. I won't let it happen."

His mouth dried. "Thank you, Cole," he whispered and gripped the sack tight in his hands. But he loosened his grip and took out the carved rabbit, a sprig of mint in its mouth, a turnip beneath a paw. Cole wrapped his hands around it, cradled it, traced the edges with slow, gentle fingers, glacial eyes wide beneath his curtain of blonde hair.

"I heard about the things you've been up to around Skyhold," said Lavellan, smiling. "I particularly liked these two. When you used the mint to make the cat play and cheer the cook up and stop the kitchen hands from being yelled at. When you threw the turnips into the fire to let the dying soldier know he was home. Also, you said you liked rabbits when we were playing Wicked Grace the other day." He returned to fiddling with the sack. "Thank you, Cole. Truly. I'm more at ease knowing you're around to help the others with the little things. I'm greatly limited by my position so I can't help as extensively as I'd like. So, thank you."

Cole hugged it close to his chest. "I'm happy," he said. "Thank you."

"I wasn't sure if you'd like it. Or want to keep it. If you don't, you can say so. I understand."

He frowned at Lavellan, as if he'd just asked how to duplicate the moon and shrink it. "Keeping it will make you happy."

"But will it make you happy?"

"I'm happy when you're happy," he said and Lavellan couldn't stop a small *aw* from escaping him. Cole stared at the rabbit, ran his fingers over its back. "I didn't understand why people give other

people things but now I do. You're in here. You give pieces of yourself and you chose to give it to me. I'm sorry. I won't hurt you again."

"It's fine," he said before he could think of it. It seemed that was the default response nowadays.

He shook his head vehemently. "It's not! I tangled you too. Threads catching on the cracked edges of cold sorrow and anger. And now it's holding you together. I can't take it all anymore. You'll fall."

Lavellan snorted in amusement. "That sounds unhealthy."

"It goes further. Pass the forest into the river into the ocean into the deep." His gaze glazed. "Memory made it dawn so you see that there's an ocean."

"What is with the water metaphors?" Lavellan mumbled to himself.

Cole stared at him. "It was water," he said ominously. "The water saved you when the shadows damned you. The water loved you. Fire loved you too. Then fire became lightning but you made it fire again. For a while."

"Cole, I have no idea what you're talking about."

He stood. "You will."

Lavellan blinked and Cole vanished in fading coils of smoke.

Solas was nowhere to be found. He was gone from the rotunda, his fresco finished.

"He left a while ago," Dorian called out over the book in his hands.

"Where to?"

"Have you tried your quarters?"

"Very funny."

Lavellan visited Solas' usual haunts, but nobody had seen him. Vergala had flown off to Creators knew where, too, so he couldn't ask her to lead him to Solas, if she even knew where he was.

His search was disrupted when he was called to settle an emergency involving a three-way dispute between an Orlesian, Fereldan, and Antivan ambassador. It took longer than it really should have considering that they were arguing about who had the *better way of governing* and Lavellan had to stand there trying to find a single thing he liked about their methods of ruling. Thank the gods for Josephine.

And then, Bianca Davri arrived and Varric looked as if somebody had stabbed him in the groin.

They spoke and arranged to visit Valammar in a few days. Lavellan pursed his lips, knew Bianca's actions had led to Corypheus finding the red lyrium. Still, blaming games never did anybody any good. Besides, either Corypheus would have found out about red lyrium from another source or he would have found something worse.

Bianca would stay the night but no longer. Varric seemed just fine with that.

When she left to find her room, Lavellan cleared his throat.

“Varric, no matter how light, your arm will get sore if you hold up a torch for long enough.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ve got some more papers to write. I’ll see you around, Inquisitor.” He turned, though his voice softened when he said, “Thanks again for the present.”

Lavellan watched him go, then peered into the rotunda again, but it was still empty. He grumbled.

More matters required his attention. By the time he'd finished his required tasks, it was late into the evening, and he was still no closer to finding Solas.

Skyhold was too big to search entirely. Lavellan rubbed his face. He retreated to his quarters and grabbed paper from his desk, scratched his letter into it, and stood outside his balcony, searching the skies for Vergala. She never strayed far from Skyhold after all. He was just about to whistle for her when she came into view. He grinned and held his arm up. She descended upon it with a cawed greeting.

“There you are,” he said. “Good timing.”

“Lavellan.”

“Do you know where Solas is?”

She tilted her head at him, blinked. “Know where he is,” she said.

Lavellan was far too exhausted to make a trek across Skyhold again, wherever that damned wolf was, so he held up the rolled letter. Tied with a halla leather cord.

“Can you give this to him?”

She took it in her claws and flew off.

Lavellan rubbed and massaged his nape with a small sigh, stared at the sack he'd dropped on his bed. He walked towards it and took out the three wolves. Unlike the other pieces which had braided strings, Solas’ had simple strings, better suited to being knotted. The wolves had also been hollowed a certain way so that they would make different notes whenever they hit one another. Nothing too drastic. Dagna had helped a lot with it.

He held the wolves by the string and swayed them, smiled at the relaxing tones they made. At this point, it was needless since Lavellan didn’t startle around Solas anymore, but some part of him liked that it had become a little thing between them.

He tucked the wolves back into the bedside drawer so he could at least surprise Solas with them.

You could have just given it to him tomorrow. Why did you invite him here?

Lavellan shut the drawers harsher than he'd intended.

He changed into a loose tunic, Skyhold’s winter chill unable to touch him because the room had recently been inlaid with various runes that let it retain heat. He tackled the paperwork left at his desk. Servants had already lit the fireplace earlier.

So preoccupied was he that the knock at the door startled him. He couldn’t be sure how much time

had passed. Lavellan rubbed his eyes and stood, took a quick glance out the doors to determine the time, but the sky was overcast, the stars and moons hidden. It would snow soon. He could feel it.

He closed the balcony doors and made his way down to his door.

“Who is it?” he called out.

“It’s Solas, Inquisitor.” There was a squawk. “And your raven.”

Ah, he’d gotten the letter. Lavellan unlocked the door, and for a short, awkward moment, they both stood there, uncertain of what to do. Vergala transferred from Solas to Lavellan’s shoulders. That broke the tentative air between them.

Solas held Lavellan’s letter in hand. “Come to my quarters,” he read out, a faint smile on his lips. “With no explanations. I suspected I may have either been in trouble or you had need of me.”

“More in need of you but not quite. Maybe.” He rubbed his eyes again. “Apologies. Today has been trying. Sorry, I’m just making you stand there. Come in.”

Vergala flew and rested on the upper walkway’s railings. Meanwhile, Solas perched himself on the couch while Lavellan fixed the papers on his desk, returned books piled on his nightstand back to their shelves, all while feeling Solas’ gaze following him. He filled the silence with stories about today’s mishaps. The ambassadors, Bianca and Varric, the dinner with Val Firmin’s dignitaries. Solas answered politely when addressed.

And Lavellan was procrastinating.

When there were no more books to be returned, no more papers to be sorted, he crouched in front of the fireplace and tended to the flames and added more wood.

The fire roared to life in front of him and he started, glanced over his shoulder. Solas lowered his hand, the last of his magic’s green light fading.

“Thank you,” Lavellan said, voice dry from either being near the flames and smoke or something else.

“What matter did you wish to discuss?” he asked, eyes glinting from the firelight.

“Not quite a discussion I was after. Maybe.” Lavellan cringed internally at his awkwardness and stood, moved towards his nightstand. “I’ve been distributing presents today.”

“So I’ve heard.” His gaze traced Lavellan’s every move.

“I’m sorry for leaving you for last.” He shot Solas a cheeky grin. “I hope you didn’t feel left out.”

Solas looked away.

Lavellan grinned wider. “You did. Creators, was that why I couldn’t find you? Were you sulking?”

“No, I was taking a walk. Exploring Skyhold and its many secrets.”

You already know it, you toad.

“Solas, I wouldn’t forget you,” he said, teasing gone from his voice, replaced by either fondness or melancholy. Lavellan was unsure which it was. He opened the drawer and retrieved the wolves wrapped in their cloth and held it close. Solas stood when Lavellan approached. “Yours were the

first I carved.”

He stopped in front of Solas, unwrapped the cloth with care, revealing the three wolves.

Solas’ eyes widened, breath caught, and he carefully swept them up into his hands.

“They were meant to replace the wooden blocks you’d placed on your staff. I... Well, I thought if people were going to stare at you strange for having blocks on your staff because of me, I may as well make them look pretty. Try holding them by the strings and sway them gently.”

He frowned in question at Lavellan but did so. They clunked pleasantly.

“Oh,” Solas whispered.

“I carved one at first but it looked lonely, so I gave it friends.” Lavellan tucked his hands behind his back and wrung the cloth, watched Solas, couldn’t read him. “A wolf needs a pack.”

“Some wolves walk alone,” murmured Solas, inspected the howling wolf, the one carved of dark wood. Lavellan grabbed the other two wolves and held them up beside it, their fingers brushing. The second wolf had its head tilted in curiosity. Another had its teeth bared, ready for battle.

“They don’t have to,” said Lavellan.

It was quiet between them, the silence thick with unsaid things, embellished by the occasional crackle from the fireplace.

“Why?” Solas asked. “Why do you insist on having me spend time with others?”

“Because you look lonely.”

Solas said nothing as he accepted the three wolves. He looked upon them with a considering and somewhat sorrowful gaze. Lavellan waited. He wasn’t sure what for.

Then, “Thank you, Mahanon.”

Lavellan’s breath escaped him at the mention of his name. Herald, Inquisitor, lethallin. *Vhenan*. Why *did* Solas rarely use his name? But he made no mention of it, feared Solas would stop.

“Do you like them?” he asked.

“How could I not?” Solas smiled. It was tentative, but it was true. “I will treasure them.”

“It’s not a requirement.”

“Nevertheless. It is from you, and so I will cherish it.” He paused in consideration. “And think on the message within it.”

Warmth spread from Lavellan’s chest, turned him into a gentle, guiding light, and it felt as if his smile were radiant with his happiness.

“That’s all I ask,” said Lavellan.

Solas looked at him as if he were the warm sunlight waking the world.

Lavellan ached, longed to reach for him, yearned to have his chest against Lavellan’s back as their hearts beat in synchrony, and *yet*. No, not this time.

Because Lavellan did not want a relationship founded on and teeming with lies.

And so, no matter how much it pained him, he took a step back.

“I’m sorry,” mumbled Lavellan, unable to meet his eyes. “I don’t mean to send you away but... I’m tired.”

Solas stared at him for a beat, then nodded. “Of course, do not trouble yourself worrying. I understand.” He clutched the wolves close and attempted a small smile. “I will see if I can knot the wolves to my staff.”

“I’ll test you on the knot tomorrow morning,” he jested.

He chuckled. “Very well, Inquisitor.” Lavellan tried not to deflate at the revert to his title. “May your dreams remain pleasant this night.”

Lavellan suspected Solas would interfere and ensure they would be anyway.

“Rest well, lethallin. Once again, thank you for dedicating your time and effort into this gift.” And without further ceremony, Solas tipped his head and turned to leave. Lavellan watched him go. Words assembled in a toppling tangle behind his teeth, but the door clicked shut and the words remained on his tongue, stayed sweet even as they staled.

They dripped from his lips and dissipated in the quiet.

Chapter End Notes

Something heartwarming because Lavellan loves his friends very much. With a dash of ouch at the end, as per usual. I'd draw the carvings but I realised I can't draw animals so I'm just going to imagine how cute they are and cry about it. They're cute, alright? Just take my word for it, they're cute. (Raven is *finally* named!). This segment wasn't supposed to be a chapter on its own but I forgot there were twelve people in the goddamn inner circle so it ended up being longer than I thought it'd be.

When Cass says she wanted to record what happened during HLTA but her writing sucked, I always yell, "Get Varric to help you! Get Varric to help you! He's literally a writer, go get Varric to help--"

Anyway, Solas has small wooden windchimes on his staff now.

Walk barefoot the path of thorn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

shadows winking in the luminary skies—

Lavellan came swinging into Alexius' lab, announcing, "I have pomegranates!"

Alexius started at his table, then shot Lavellan and the fruit basket he was carrying a disdainful look. Solas sighed behind Lavellan.

"Solas, you've let a few roaches inside," said Alexius.

"I apologise. It was a very persistent roach."

"This roach has fruit. Who's hungry?" he asked, then noticed the two adolescents huddled over a paper on the table. They looked up, only just noticing him.

"Your Worship," squeaked the elven girl. She was dark-skinned with tight coils of hair held in elaborate braids, her staff strapped to her back. The other girl beside her was human, pale, freckled and red of hair, a meek yet inquisitive gleam in her eyes. They must be the apprentices Fiona had chosen. Both couldn't have been older than sixteen. Lavellan's gaze softened and he toned his energy down, placed the fruit basket on a side table, and approached them with an amiable smile.

"Hello," he greeted. "You must be the apprentices Fiona has chosen."

"Yes, Your Worship," said the elven girl, starstruck. "We've been assisting Magister Alexius—"

"Not a magister anymore," huffed Alexius.

"Uh. Um. Ser Alexius."

He harrumphed. "*Ser.*"

"Have you actually told them what they can call you?" Lavellan asked. Alexius' silence was answer enough. "There we go. Free permission to call him whatever your heart desires."

"Oh, I don't— I'm. Uh."

Lavellan resisted grimacing. He was still intimidating them. In the background, Solas slipped into an easy conversation with Alexius.

"What're your names?" he asked them.

"I'm Felanor, Your Worship," said the elven girl and she gestured at her companion. "This is Rosalie."

Lavellan inquired about their day, what they were in the middle of doing (solving Alexius' challenge of using only three ingredients to stabilise a volatile concoction he'd made), and learned a little of their past. Felanor had grown up in Val Royeux's alienage, and as she spoke of the conditions, Lavellan's frown deepened further. The alienage was far from the Summer Bazaar, where one would initially enter Royeaux. They were hidden, tucked away like the forgotten shames

of old noble houses. Over ten thousand elves had been shoved into an area that would have had trouble accommodating for even a thousand.

He'd been aware that there was an alienage at Royeaux, but it was so far from where they'd usually conduct their business that he'd never wandered far. Also, he hadn't been keen on roaming the streets with his ears and tattoos blaring a glaring reminder. Now, he cursed himself for not investigating further.

But what can you do?

Nothing.

Yet.

And that yet lingered like a dark promise in his mind.

Rosalie held herself tight, answering with a soft voice that Lavellan had to strain to hear.

"It's alright, Rosalie," he assured. "If you're not comfortable talking to me, that's perfectly fine."

"I, too, am uncomfortable talking to you, Inquisitor," Alexius said from his workstation. "Will you leave then?"

"Not until you eat your pomegranate, you geriatric sod."

Solas snorted as he wrote something into a journal. Rosalie took him up on his offer and immediately clammed up, shuffling closer to Felanor.

"We were in the Montsimmard Circle together," Felanor explained.

"Have you two been treated well at Skyhold?" Lavellan asked.

"Nobody's called me knife-ear at all," said Felanor. "It's a nice change."

Lavellan narrowed his eyes in consideration. "What about rabbit?"

Orlesians thought themselves so cute and clever when they referred to elves as rabbits.

No, fuck off. They'd reduced the elves to animals. Cute, little, fluffy, docile *pets*.

She shook her head. His stormy mood passed, pleased that the Inquisition had cultivated a pleasant atmosphere for the elves, though he highly suspected it was because of him. Often, people would hurriedly assure him that they had always treated elves fairly, always kind, always respectful.

"No, nobody's called me rabbit," said Felanor. "I haven't heard anyone called that too."

Lavellan sighed in relief and turned to Rosalie. "What about you, Rosalie? Have you been treated fairly? Nobody's hurt you here, verbally, physically, otherwise?"

Rosalie stared at him for a moment, assessed him with her gaze, and Lavellan stayed quiet, met her gaze in kind with a sincere one that he hoped conveyed trust. She held herself carefully, protective, coiled tight, ready to escape if needed in a bid to continue surviving. Lavellan felt his own muscles pulled in a similar way. Too aware of everything around them. Whatever her past was, it had not been kind.

"You made it safe," she murmured.

Alexius stopped writing. Solas watched them through the corner of his eyes.

“I’m glad,” Lavellan said. “In the corner tower by the rear bailey’s battlements, the one nearest to the brewery, there’s a ladder covered by a tarp. Use it to push open the hatch on the ceiling and climb to the rooftop. If you ever need a quiet place to get away to when you get overwhelmed.” He smiled and looked at Felanor. “Both of you.”

Rosalie’s eyes misted as she nodded her head.

“Okay,” she said, voice shaky. “Thank you, Inquisitor.”

Lavellan fixed Alexius with a grave and deadly look. “Take care of them.”

“Don’t fret your head, Inquisitor. I’m no Erimond, willing to terrorise anything that moves because it grants him the attention and satisfaction he never received from his parents.”

Lavellan snorted. “You don’t like him, I take it.”

“Peh.”

“We agree on something? We need to mark this momentous occasion.”

Alexius looked at Solas. “How do you put up with him?”

“How indeed?” mused Solas with a small smile. “Let him tire himself out.”

“Shut up and eat my pomegranates,” said Lavellan.

“Is that a euphemism?” asked Solas.

“Shove this euphemism up yours.”

The day had been going so well.

Until Mother Giselle handed him the letter from Dorian’s father and urged him *not* to tell Dorian.

Obviously, Lavellan told him.

They returned to Skyhold two days later after meeting Dorian’s father at Redcliffe and sorting out Valammar with Bianca. Both Varric and Dorian retreated quietly. He shared an uneasy look with Blackwall, who cleared his throat and offered to return the mounts to the stables.

Well. That had gone well.

Lavellan checked up on Dorian, ended up defusing an argument between him and Mother Giselle, but then, the arrival of a comtesse required Lavellan’s presence. He shot Dorian an apologetic look and he waved Lavellan off with a small smile.

“Oh don’t give me that look. I’ll be fine. I am a grown man who can finish an entire bottle of Golden Scythe on his own.”

Lavellan grimaced. That bad, huh?

“Don’t actually finish it. Drink it as if I were with you in spirit.”

“Don’t you fret your pretty head. I only plan to drink myself into a stupor, not death.”

“See to it that you don’t. Who else will complain about the lack of my library’s extensiveness?”

That drew a small, if tired, chuckle out of him at least. “Go on, Inquisitor.”

Lavellan left him hesitantly and went out to meet with whoever he needed to meet for the day, then resumed his lessons with Josephine about the subtle code Orlesian nobles would employ while gossiping. A mix of metaphors or euphemisms. He already knew them, but it never hurt to solidify his knowledge.

“Very good, Inquisitor,” she praised. “Why, I believe you may just be fluent enough for the ball.” Josephine glanced out the window and squinted at the sky. “I cannot see the sun,” she muttered. “I suspect another snowfall this evening.”

“Will that be all for today?” he asked.

“Oh! No, one moment. There is one more thing...” She moved to her table and opened a drawer, took out a small box. “It arrived this morning but you were still riding back from the Hinterlands. It is the amulet you were asking for. For Cole.”

Unease filled him. Oh no. Already?

She revealed the amulet, gleaming a deep, dark emerald, veined with blue. Lyrium. Lavellan picked it up.

It shocked his hand.

He jerked his hand away on instinct. The amulet fell on the carpet.

Josephine picked it up, directed a worried gaze at him while he rubbed the spot the amulet had stung. It was on his right hand. He couldn’t blame the Anchor this time.

“Inquisitor, are you alright?” she asked.

“I— Yes, I just—” He slipped into an easy laugh, believable, fake as it was. “I must have felt the magic and got surprised. Elves are a little bit more sensitive to the Veil and the Fade, sorry if I frightened you.”

“No, it’s quite alright.” She presented the amulet once more. Lavellan took it by the cloth and didn’t directly touch it, just in case.

“Thank you, you’re a champion,” he said. “I’ll go take this to Solas.”

Josephine nodded and smiled. “Best of luck, Inquisitor.”

Solas looked up from his book when Lavellan walked into the rotunda. His eyes fell on the amulet in Lavellan's hand and he stood, closed the book.

"Excellent, you have acquired it," he said.

Lavellan glanced at the cover and smiled. "Are you reading Varric's book?"

"Ah, yes. Hard in Hightown. It is an intriguing read. He is masterful with his words, weaving them in a way which strings you along. The symptom of a talented author." He frowned at Lavellan. "Is everything alright?"

He blinked. "Do I look not alright?"

"You seem shaken."

"Oh, ah, it's nothing. Just a long day, is all. So then, I'll go get Cole."

Solas accepted the amulet and nodded, still staring at him in worry, but Lavellan escaped. He rubbed the spot on his palm where the amulet had stung him as he swung by the tavern's attic, and sighed in relief when he found Cole there. Vergala was with him too.

"You must be so tired," Cole murmured to Vergala. "You flew far. He made you stay, that was cruel of him. You don't like him. He killed his shadow. It's okay. Your shadow is light, but he's still yours and you're still his."

Lavellan lingered by the stairs, the merriment of the tavern a distant sound, but he focused on their conversation.

Vergala cawed at Cole.

"It's not the same," he said, voice saddening. "No. But he was never meant to be and you know that. Faces change but it's still there, himself. You never would have found him if the wheel hadn't turned." Cole looked up at Lavellan, stared straight into the depths of his soul. "The eclipse is coming."

"Good evening to you too, Cole," Lavellan greeted, unnerved.

Vergala cawed, "Lavellan!" and circled him before settling on his shoulders. He smiled at her and rubbed the underside of her beak as she puffed her feathers.

"Cole, I managed to get the Amulet of the Unbound," he said. "Would you like to come with me? Solas is preparing it in the rotunda."

His eyes widened. "Yes."

Lavellan returned to the rotunda with Vergala and Cole following like a restless puppy. The amulet was hovering between Solas' hands, sparking with green energy, and the hair-raising sensation skated over his skin. Lavellan held himself back. As did Cole.

"It is alright, Cole," reassured Solas.

"It's lightning," he said. "Reaching for me. I don't want to get struck."

"It will not strike you Cole. I have calibrated and charged it and it should now work without

detriment to your person. Once you wear it, you should be protected.”

Cole looked at Lavellan. He nodded at Cole but couldn't shake off the fact that they'd both felt the same hesitation regarding the amulet.

Solas offered the amulet and Cole only walked forward once Lavellan eased and guided him towards it, gentle hand on his back. Cole placed hesitant fingers upon it, then, apparently satisfied that it wouldn't strike him, wore it around his neck. Lavellan already knew it wouldn't work. Cole was caught between spirit and human.

Even so, he said, “Whenever you're ready, Cole.”

He nodded. “They can't make me a monster.”

Solas extended his arm towards the amulet, green smoke and light dancing between his fingers and over his palms. The amulet glowed, the lyrium sang—

A flash. The magic was rejected.

Cole staggered back with a cry and Lavellan turned away with a grimace from the light and— And the magic itself. Vergala squawked in alarm but stayed on Lavellan's shoulders. The aberrant energy from the amulet's magic slithered over Lavellan's skin and left an uncomfortable trail.

Varric made an appearance as predicted.

“What was that?” he asked, found Cole clutching at his head. He frowned. “Oh for— What are you doing to the kid?”

“Stopping blood mages from binding me like the demons at Adamant,” said Cole as he turned to face him, eyes downcast. “But it didn't work.”

“Something is interfering with the enchantment,” said Solas.

Varric crossed his arms. “Something like Cole not being a demon?”

“He's not a demon because he's a spirit,” said Lavellan. “They're not actually interchangeable, you know?”

Varric raised his arms up in surrender. “Alright, but my point still stands.”

Cole made a frustrated noise and paced, shook his head. “I don't matter!” he cried, voice rising in pitch from his distress. “Just lock away the parts of me that someone else could knot together to make me follow!”

The three of them shared a look. Solas approached Cole and laid a careful hand on his back.

“Focus on the amulet,” he encouraged. “Tell me what you feel.”

Cole bowed his head, silent as he thought. “Warm,” he said. “Soft blanket covering, but it catches, tears, I'm the wrong shape, there's something...” His head snapped up and he pointed at a direction. “There,” he breathed. “That way.”

He walked away before they could comment on it.

“We should follow him,” said Lavellan and hurried after him. “Cole, wait!”

But Cole's focus had narrowed and he'd become single-minded in his purpose and stride. It didn't look like he was going to stop even though it was already night. He turned to Vergala and nodded at Cole.

"Follow him. Tell him to wait by the horses," he said, didn't even spare a thought if she would understand but she was off his shoulders and following Cole without fuss. Huh. He should really stop doubting her. "Pack your bags," he told Solas and Varric. "We're going on an adventure. Again. Before he runs off and hurts himself."

Lavellan dashed up to his quarters and slapped on his riding gear and leather coat, slipped his weapons on his hips and back, shoved supplies in his pack, blew his hair out of his face. He frowned at it. Getting long. He grabbed a band and tied his hair on the way back down then slipped a cloak on.

They reconvened at the stables. Cole was waiting with Vergala and Solas. Lavellan requested for the stablehands to prepare horses and equip them with camping gear.

"Are you certain you don't want to wait until morning, Cole?" Solas asked.

"No."

Vergala flew back to him and said, "Clever Vergala."

Lavellan chuckled. "You really going to ask me to praise you every time you do something impressive, huh? Alright. Very good, clever Vergala." She butted her head against his neck, burrowing into the warmth of his hood.

Solas leaned on his staff as he watched the interaction. The wolves were already on his staff, swinging in the nightly breeze, their tones pleasant and soothing.

"You've named her," he said.

"After long last, right?" She pulled his hood down so she could rest in it. He grumbled at the extra weight on his back. "Combined veredhe and galanor."

"Elegant mayhem," mused Solas with a faint smile. "I see. An apt name."

Varric joined them a few minutes later, his crossbow slung over his back, hood drawn. He scowled at Lavellan and Solas. "How did you both pack so fast?"

"I do not carry much," said Solas.

"Dalish," said Lavellan.

"Inquisitor, your horses," said the stablehand. She was new, though Lavellan recalled her name. Recalled her face.

Because she was one of Fen'Harel's.

"Thank you, Samara."

She offered him a warm smile. "Take care, Worship. Two tents and four bedrolls, as requested." She bowed and left.

"Do you know every single person in Skyhold?" Varric asked, mildly impressed.

“Oh, no,” said Lavellan with a soft laugh. “My memory’s not *that* good. I just try to remember those I can.”

They swung on their mounts and followed Cole as he raced ahead. Together, the four of them (and Vergala) rode off into the night.

Lavellan’s mind spun and unravelled and knotted and tangled with questions, but he was unsure what the questions were. In the end, he focused on the chill upon his face and the impending soreness of his muscles.

His mind stayed blessedly blank.

They camped for the night at the halfway point to the Hinterlands and set up near the shores of Lake Calenhad.

Cole and Vergala wandered the banks while Lavellan set up the fire for the others, huddling around it and eating the jerky they’d packed for the trip. He stretched his sore legs out.

After a while of eating in silence, Varric angled his head towards Solas. “Alright, I get it, you like spirits,” he said. “But he came into this world to be a person. Let him be one.”

Lavellan glanced at him. As far as he was concerned, Cole *was* a person. Was already one even before being Cole. He understood where Varric was coming from but the reason Cole had crossed into this world was because he’d been traumatised over not being able to help the original Cole, but Lavellan stayed quiet because they didn’t know that yet.

“This is not one of your fanciful stories, Child of Stone,” said Solas. “We cannot change our nature by wishing.”

Lavellan grimaced.

“You don’t think?” challenged Varric.

Solas gazed at the fire, expression unreadable. “However we deal with the problem, the issue at hand is whatever is interfering with the enchantment. We should focus on that.”

Varric sighed and retreated into one of the tents, no doubt still exhausted from earlier. They *did* just return from the Hinterlands this morning. Solas stood and retreated into the other tent as well without another word. Lavellan stayed alone by the fire and stared at the flickers of it, comforted by the whispers of the Well and the crackle of the flames until he grew bored. He poured dirt into the fire and stood, deliberated sleeping, then scoffed.

He approached Cole and Vergala instead, Lake Calenhad serene in the moonlight. Lavellan sat beside Cole. Vergala nestled into his lap and he stroked her head with a soft smile.

“She misses you,” said Cole.

“She’s been with me for a while.”

“Yes.”

“And she still misses me?”

“She missed you in the space between.”

Lavellan frowned at that, but he shook his head and filed it away instead. “How are you feeling, Cole?”

“We’re close. It’s bright but... faint. I don’t know if it’s calling or pushing me away. I need to know.” He looked at Lavellan. “Just like you need to know.”

“I know what’s about to happen, Cole,” he said. “Varric thinks you’ve become too human. What do you think?”

“As long as I can still help. That’s who I am. I don’t want to hurt.”

“What if you have to hurt to help?” Lavellan murmured.

“I don’t want to be like him. He made himself forget.”

Compassion.

Lavellan mourned that he couldn’t ask, couldn’t demand answers.

Vergala fell asleep. He draped the edge of his cloak over her and held her close.

“She understands everything you say,” said Cole. “But she holds back because she thinks you’ll be scared. She knows you test her. She’s not just a bird; she’s more.”

Lavellan frowned at that and glanced at Cole in question. “Is she possessed by a spirit?”

“More. But less. She sings like you but she stayed longer.”

“You’re not making sense.”

Cole fixed him with another stare that wrapped around his soul, picking out all the vulnerabilities like an archer scanning for weak points in the enemy's armour.

“You don’t want it to make sense,” he said.

Lavellan froze.

“What?” he asked, though his voice came out shaky. “Of course I do.”

“When you start getting them back, I will help,” promised Cole. “Your memories.”

He stared down at his hands and found himself rubbing the spot where the amulet had struck him.

“Thank you, Cole.”

“You should sleep.”

“If I can.”

Cole stared at him for a while, then his eyes glimmered with new information. “You sleep better when there are stories. She sings, not as melodic as you remember, but it’s all you’ve ever wanted. It kept you there. Saved you.”

Was he referring to his mother's lullaby?

"What was her name?" asked Cole.

Lavellan closed his eyes. "Laneira."

"She was named for the snow because of her hair," said Cole. "I can't sing but I can help you sleep."

"Maybe later," he murmured. "Just... stay here with me."

He heard shuffling, soil shifting and gravel crunching, and he opened his eyes. Cole moved himself so he was sitting right next to Lavellan, head tilted skywards so he could watch the stars.

"Do they have names too?" asked Cole.

"Which?"

"The stars."

Lavellan looked up, found and formed the constellations with ease. The stars were the Dalish's guide as they travelled, as they hunted, as they stayed.

"Not individually," he said. "But clusters of them form vague shapes. Those clusters have names."

"Why?"

"They're guides. It's easier to remember them when they have names."

Cole bowed his head. "That's why you held onto yours," he mumbled, as if things were slowly making sense. If only he could share that with Lavellan. All he had was increasing confusion and constant dread. "What are their names?"

Lavellan picked out one of the simpler constellations. "See that one? Vaguely looks like a sword? They named it Judex but the Dalish call it Dar'misaan."

That was how they spent the night, tracing constellations, lit by the reflection of the moonlight on the lake's surface, until Lavellan fell asleep. He awoke at daybreak with a blanket over him and Cole's hat as his pillow.

Lavellan couldn't feel his arse when they alighted at Redcliffe. Creators, he still had to ride back to Skyhold.

Cole barrelled on ahead and at least granted them the courtesy of walking and not disappearing in a curl of shadows and smoke.

Redcliffe bustled in the morning, moving and waking again, no longer in a constant state of anticipating a fall into the dark. Vibrant. Busy. Most importantly, safe. They wended through the village, squeezing through the narrow paths between cabins. Lavellan kept his hood up. No time to be delayed from being recognised and stopped.

He noted that Varric had tied his fox to the strap of his quiver and Lavellan smiled.

They found the man Cole had been searching for near the edge of the village outskirts where the cliffs overlooked Lake Calenhad. Lavellan clenched his fists. *Here we go.*

“You!” Cole accused. He became shadow and reappeared in front of the man, grabbed his head and forced him to kneel, held a knife against his throat. “You killed me!”

The ex-Templar held his arms up, eyes wide. “What, I don’t... I don’t even know you.”

“You forgot. You locked me in the dungeon in the Spire, and you forgot, and I died in the dark!” Every word laced with pain, pitch turning fevered and frantic and Lavellan saw the image of a young boy battering the walls with bloodied palms and begging. Cole had wailed in his pain and Compassion had come.

Solas rushed forward. “Cole, stop.”

Cole hesitated, but his grip loosened and the ex-Templar ran, turned the corner. Cole's grip on his dagger remained tight and his eyes burned, blazed, and he geared to follow the Templar. Varric stepped in the way with his hands raised in placation.

“Just take it easy, kid,” he urged.

The three of them did their best to calm Cole’s agitation as he explained the circumstances of the original Cole’s death, the hurt in his voice gripping at Lavellan’s chest.

Cole stalked forward. “Let me kill him,” he muttered. “I need to... I need to.”

Lavellan turned to Vergala, recalled Cole’s words last night about how she understood, how she feared Lavellan would react if he knew she understood all. He still wasn’t sure what she was but...

“Talk to him,” he said. “At least slow him down.”

She looked at him with astute, intelligent eyes, then cawed and flew after Cole.

“We cannot let Cole kill him,” said Solas.

“Nobody was suggesting that, Chuckles.”

They launched into a debate about Cole, his purpose, his nature. Lavellan deliberated both of their views, considered them, ultimately decided they were both too extreme in their response. Solas was right, Cole couldn’t be human. Cole was a spirit and if Cole hurt this man in the name of revenge, there was a very real danger of him becoming a demon. But Solas wanted him to forget about Cole.

That couldn't happen. Why was it that his solution to everything seemed to be *scrap it all up and do it over again?*

“Stay put,” said Lavellan. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Wh— Inquisitor!” Solas called out.

“Trust me.”

Solas faltered then, uncertain, body still pitched forward as if to follow. Lavellan caught up with Cole, who was ignoring Vergala. Not a terribly great sign. She cawed and returned to Lavellan’s

shoulders.

“Tried,” she said.

“I know, thank you.”

The ex-Templar stopped at the edge of the cliff, left with nothing but a steep drop into the unforgiving waters of the lake ahead of him. He turned, frantic.

“I’m sorry!” he pleaded. “I’m so sorry!”

“Cole,” Lavellan called out and surprisingly, Cole stopped. A fair distance behind them were Solas and Varric, watching in worry.

“I need to kill him,” Cole seethed. “Let me. Please. You understand! You killed so you could feel better!”

“Please,” the Templar babbled. Lavellan shot him a venomous glance.

“Quiet,” Lavellan said. “Shutting up may very well save your life.”

That did the trick.

Lavellan rested a gentle hand on Cole’s shoulders, expression and disposition doing a quick shift. “Cole, I didn’t feel better after killing. You know that. I don’t kill to feel better. You know that too.”

Cole bowed his head, as if shamed. “No,” he agreed.

Lavellan nodded at the Templar. “Is he sorry?”

Another beat of silence.

“He remembers now,” murmured Cole. “He knows he killed me.”

“Is he sorry?” he asked again. The Templar stayed silent at least, had taken Lavellan’s earlier warning to heart.

Cole shuffled, fiddled with the hem of his sleeve. “Yes.”

“Is he in pain?”

“Yes,” he said. “They clap me on the back, scent of oiled metal and blood. They smile like Louis did when he made me drown the kittens. Laughter bounces off the walls like a thin child’s fists.”

“Good,” said Lavellan. “And what about you? Are you in pain?” Cole’s shoulders tensed under Lavellan’s hand and Lavellan gave it a gentle squeeze, eased him back. “You feel Cole’s pain. What about Compassion’s pain?”

“Catching through the Veil, called out and I couldn’t help his hurt. So I take his place. Free him from the pain without more pain.”

“So who did the Templar kill?”

“Me.”

“Try again,” he murmured.

Cole frowned, cast his gaze down. “Cole.”

“And you are?”

“Compassion.”

“What does Compassion do?”

“I heal, help the hurt.”

“Yes,” agreed Lavellan. “And in this situation, who is hurt?”

“Me. Him.” He paused. “And Cole.”

“And do you think you can help all three of them?”

Cole shook his head. “I couldn’t save Cole. I couldn’t help him!”

“I’m going to have to clear up something here,” said Lavellan. “Helping doesn’t always equal saved. You cannot save everyone, but you can help. With little things. With big things. What did Cole say to you before he died?”

He paused in silence. Lavellan shot Solas and Varric another look over his shoulder. They were still rooted in place, anxiously watching, but he wasn’t sure how much they could hear, if at all. Solas looked ready to march over to them. But he stayed.

A soft breath escaped Cole. “He said, ‘Thank you.’” He looked at Lavellan with wide, hopeful eyes. “I... helped him?”

He smiled. “You did,” he said. “You did. Cole has been helped. Now what about Compassion? How do we help Compassion stop hurting?”

Cole watched the Templar. “I help him.”

“How?”

Smoke swirled in his hand, and slowly, he raised it.

“Forget,” he said.

“No.” Lavellan covered the smoking hand with his own and eased it down. “No. Not like that.”

He looked at Lavellan with furrowed brows. “But you said to help him!”

“I did.”

“I’m helping!”

“Are you?”

They both looked at the cowering Templar. Lavellan noted with dry amusement that it was quite a lovely day for such a dreary event—the skies were vibrant and blue and the sun was out but not intense. The winter chill was bearable. “Must it always end with them forgetting? You’re in a unique position, Cole. A spirit who knew what it was to be human, briefly, while remaining a

spirit. You understand a few things which make this world and humans fundamentally different from the Fade and spirits. What do you think it is?"

"They... change. Not around them. In them. They change. They learn."

Lavellan beamed. "Yes! They learn from their mistakes, they change from their mistakes. Sometimes, they need to hurt for them to grow. Sometimes, letting them carry that hurt now will help them move forward and stop other hurts from happening whether in them or in others. What about Blackwall? Is he hurt?"

"He is. Red slipping from steel, the bodies were small. No metal was worth the stain on the gold. He's still hurt by it."

"But has he hurt others like that after?"

His frown eased, as if something had been brought to light. "He... doesn't want to. Wants to be kind. Like the man who gave his life for him, so he wants to be something worthwhile. Wants to save those he can."

"Just as you helped Cole, Cole helped you too. He let you know what it was to be human." He gripped both his shoulders now. "You are Compassion. You wish to help, but know that sometimes, you can help a person by letting them carry their hurt so they can grow and become *compassionate*. We need more of you in the world. More helpers. More who care."

Cole looked at Lavellan, then back at the Templar again.

"Forgive him, Compassion, but do not forget him." He let go of Cole. "You're not Cole, but don't forget him either. He has shown you how to help in so many other ways besides forgetting. You are not as you were when you started, you've changed too, in a way. But you're still you, in essence."

Cole took a hesitant step towards the Templar, and another, and another, until they were both eye to eye. Until the Templar fell to his knees in shivering sobs with apologies slipping from his lips like a haunted prayer.

Until Cole placed his hand on his head and said, "I forgive you."

The Templar looked up at Cole with teary eyes.

"Never forget me," said Cole. "Never forget who you killed. His name is Cole."

The Templar bowed his head in shame and finally let the tears flow. "Cole," he whispered.

"Words stuck, strung from the staleness of my tongue. It's not right." Cole's voice softened. "Say it. When it's wrong, say it's not right. You can do it. She knew you could."

He straightened his back and walked away. Lavellan cast one final look at the Templar, sobbing and shaking, wondered once again if his meddling would only result in harm.

Lavellan walked back astride Cole.

"Sometimes they have to forget," said Cole.

"Yes."

"But sometimes, they should remember."

“Yes.”

“And I have to choose? How do I know if I make the right choice?”

“Sometimes you can’t really tell just yet. Healing can take a while. But it happens. In small pieces.”

“Like when the Iron Bull finds it easier to smile without it being a lie every day. Or when the Magister stops crying over the locket with his son and wife.”

Lavellan smiled. “Yeah.”

They hurt. They healed. The world went on. And if they were lucky, a well-meaning spirit of Compassion would drop by and help them with the process.

Vergala cawed and hopped onto Compassion’s shoulders. Cole’s shoulders?

“What do you want to be called?” asked Lavellan. “Cole or Compassion?”

He stroked Vergala’s head. “Cole,” he said. “I’m not him, but I want to remember him. I helped him and he helped me.” He looked at Lavellan. “You helped me too. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Cole.”

When they reunited with Solas and Varric, Varric asked, “You’re not angry anymore?”

“I was. But I helped him. And I helped me too.”

Disappointment flashed in Varric’s eyes while approval flashed in Solas’.

“You helped his pain?” asked Solas. “Made him forget?”

“No.” Cole glanced at Lavellan. “If I make him forget, he won’t learn. And he’ll keep hurting. I let him remember. He hurts now, but he’ll learn, and he’ll say no when the world tells him what’s wrong is right. No more hurting. Hurting leads to hurt.”

Lavellan chewed on his lip. “Should we try the amulet now?”

He wasn’t sure what he would do if the amulet didn’t work. If it didn’t, he’d probably have to leave it to Solas.

Because that had worked out so well for them all last time.

They ducked into a relatively hidden area and Solas cast his hands and magic out once more. Green light danced in the spaces. The lyrium sang. Its song ended not with an unfinished note, but with a rounded, peaceful tenor.

Lavellan breathed easier.

Solas lowered his hands and nodded. “The amulet is working. Cole should be sufficiently protected now.”

Cole watched the green glow of the amulet fade. He then turned and walked ahead, let Vergala hop on his hat. “She wants to fly. The children want to play. They’ll love her.”

And he disappeared, took Vergala with him. A dull pulsing ache flickered at the back of Lavellan’s

head and he frowned.

Varric and Solas looked at Lavellan.

“What did you do?” asked Varric.

Lavellan sat on the floor, the strange headache tightening around his head and making him light-headed. When he glanced up at them, the world blurred for a second.

“I helped,” he answered, tongue heavy.

The headache worsened, left Lavellan faint and irritable, every light or noise a nuisance. He couldn't clearly remember the ride back to Skyhold and the walk to the rotunda. Sit. He had to sit.

He settled for the floor because the couch was too far. Vergala cawed at him in worry. He mustered a small smile and stroked her head.

“You changed him.”

Lavellan looked up from patting Vergala. Solas was frowning at his finished fresco.

Varric sat on the armrest of the couch, frowning too, and all these frowning faces had Lavellan doing it as well. So by going in the middle, did he just make them both unhappy? But no, it wasn't quite the middle was it? The middle was where they'd started. Instead of pulling one way or the other from either side, Lavellan had urged Cole into whatever direction Cole had determined as forward, and the result was a more nuanced view of what it meant to embody Compassion.

Hopefully.

“Is that dissatisfaction I hear?” Lavellan grumbled.

“Urging him to retain a person's hurt?” Solas asked, whirled on Lavellan as his tone adopted the beginnings of his argumentative pitch. “That could have twisted him. It is counterintuitive to his nature as Compassion.”

“How? Because he lets them keep hurting? Didn't you hear his whole explanation of reaping the rewards later by letting that happen? And it's not as if that'll be his solution to everything. Besides, the amulet worked, didn't it?”

“The results are not always the most vital part of a solution,” he argued.

Lavellan almost threw his shoe at him. Look who was fucking talking!

“Solas, you yourself said spirits are more complex and more nuanced than what they appear to be.”

“Yes, but to a reasonable extent! You cannot keep testing the boundaries of how much you may alter the course of an outcome. Not with those who hold their own autonomy! What if your actions had hurt Cole?”

Lavellan's mood darkened. He stood, though the world spun as he did, and he hoped the sudden disorientation didn't dull his glower.

Vergala sensed the charged atmosphere and flew off to perch on the scaffolding.

“You think I would have placed Cole in danger because I was *experimenting*? Creators Solas, just say you never trusted me and go.” The headache pulsed, skittered over his scalp.

“My disapproval does not equate to distrust, Inquisitor,” he fired back.

Varric watched them, quiet in his corner, drained from both this whole Cole ordeal and the situation with Bianca and the red lyrium. He shook his head and approached them with a relaxed yet exhausted stride.

“Alright, let’s all take a deep breath. Glowy, nobody was saying you’re not trusted. Chuckles, stop antagonising him.”

“I suppose this outcome must please you, Master Tethras,” said Solas, snippy.

“Would you stop that?” Lavellan snapped. “Stop picking a fight with everybody, your argumentativeness gives everyone in the vicinity a headache.” Or worsened it anyway.

“Maker’s balls,” Varric muttered. “Chuckles this was never about us. This was about Cole.” He rubbed the back of his head. “And we all made it about us anyway. Look, I’ve thought about what the Inquisitor said, about the whole Cole was already a person thing and he’s right. I was projecting what I wanted onto him. I didn’t even consider him. So you know, we all sort of wanted to shape him to be what we wanted.”

“And it was the Inquisitor who made the final call,” said Solas. “Which is now well irreversible. Spirits are not meant to change. But of course we will accept this now. After all, Inquisitor Lavellan is in the right once again and always will be!”

“What the hell is your problem?” Lavellan erupted, the sudden volume worsening the constriction around his head. “You could have objected before I did anything!”

Solas clenched his jaw and pressed his lips.

And it clicked.

Lavellan let out a disbelieving and breathy laugh. “Oh, I see.”

“Do you now? Has the Inquisitor turned his hawk-eyed gaze towards me? Staring deep into my soul?”

“Try this on for size. You’re angry that you were proven wrong,” he said. “Spirits *can* change, but not in a way that defies their nature which turns them into a demon or some other grave consequence that your fatalist fetish so clearly enjoys wallowing in.” Solas pulled his lips in scorn at the remark. “Go on, say I’m mistaken. Know that you’ll be telling a lie.”

“Ah, and now you claim expertise over my person as well? Very typical of someone raised by the—”

“Bring the Dalish into this one more time and I will rip your tongue out myself, Fade Walker.”

“Please,” goaded Solas, pitch lowering, “I endeavour you to *try*.”

“Okay!” Varric intervened and clapped his hands. “Alright, that’s enough out of you two. Andraste’s ass, I need—”

“Help?”

Varric jumped as Cole materialised on the table, tilting his head at them.

“Kid!” said Varric. “Shit am I glad to see you. The elves are fighting again and the tiny dwarf is getting ran over.”

Lavellan bared his teeth at Solas, hoped it didn’t become a grimace because could that *awful fucking headache piss off*? “Perhaps if somebody had brought it up politely without resulting to making a giant argument about it because he jacks off to the sound of his own voice!”

“And if somebody were to perhaps present a sound counterpoint instead of relying on crude insults.”

“I can still present sound counterpoints while crudely insulting you. You just don’t want to listen.”

Solas’ shoulders were tense, every muscle in him coiled and crouching and ready to pounce and tear into Lavellan’s throat.

Come fucking get me then.

“Burning, bright and bloodied. I am fire and he is light. It’s alright,” said Cole, voice softening. “I’m alright. I’m me and I won’t not be me again. They can’t press walls around me anymore.”

“It is fortunate that you are unharmed, Cole, but the damage the Inquisitor could have done—”

“Solas,” Cole assured before Lavellan could yell at him some more, “it’s alright. It will be. He didn’t make me, didn’t force me. He guided me; I answered. He didn’t change me; I changed me. And I help better like this.”

It was lucky that the rotunda was empty for now. Last thing Skyhold needed was seeing their Inquisitor screaming at Solas.

He rubbed his face. The aftermath of anger would always leave him shaking and tingling, fingers cold. Would always drain him of energy. It was a taxing emotion. Lavellan was sick of it but it still festered far too easily with him, like a wound that had never fully healed.

He had to leave, extricate himself from the situation and cool off before he could say something he regretted. Maybe lie down before he collapsed because the strange headache was splitting his head now. The lights were too bright and his vision couldn’t focus.

Lavellan shook his head and turned. Terrible idea. It worsened everything and now the room was spinning.

“And where are you going?” Solas asked.

“Away. Before I say or do anything I regret.” It was cold. Chills wracked him and he hugged himself. The world swayed.

“Glowy, watch out for the—”

Lavellan clipped his shoulder on the scaffolding and he staggered back, righted himself on one of its beams. His surroundings whirled. Colours spilled from their boundaries. The headache split, cleaved, gnawed. A prickling sensation coated the back of his head and his hearing pressed, muffled.

“—sitor?”

Where was he?

He looked up, ink leaking over the spilling colours and forming two shadows, adopting the shape of two people.

“We are alike, you and I,” a cold voice whispered in his head.

“Don’t lump me in with the likes of you,” answered another voice, just as cold and faded.

A searing, spearing pain lanced the top of his skull and Lavellan cried out, clutched at his head. He lost his stability and collapsed, crashed onto something hard. The shadows dissipated.

“Who was that?” he muttered feverishly to himself and reached his hand out for something steady but found nothing

The ink bled, trailed, curved in abstract patterns and another wave of chills wracked him. Winks of light.

Something cold on his forehead but something warm around him, solid against him.

“He is delirious from fever. Foolish! I should have known he wasn’t feeling well. Wake the healers and acquire elfroot tonic.”

“He had a fever and *didn’t* tell us?”

No, don’t—

“No, don’t wake anyone. He won’t like that.”

“He’s not exactly in a state to decide that, kid!”

“It’s fine. We were waiting for this.”

“What?”

Lavellan swayed with the world, lost in its colours. Shifted, moved with its momentum. He let it carry him just as a river would carry an autumn leaf to the sea. Floated, free, fell—

Hit a wall.

His body convulsed, on the first throes of its life.

“Fenedhis— Varric, help me with his cloak and collar. Get it off his neck.”

“Right.”

All the colours surged into him, filled him fit to bursting but he knew they wouldn’t stop. Would keep going and going until he became a spray of gore and ink and pigmented pain and how could anybody live like this? Why would he crawl through agony? Why?

He turned you into art.

Ah, that was why.

Devotion spilled over his lips.

“It cannot be enough. Shouldn’t.”

“What would you know? You abandoned it.”

“More than you think.”

Who was that? Who were you? Who was he?

A soothing voice cut through the fog and the colours and disjointed shards of the shattered deep.

“I said I would help you. I’m here. Let me help.”

Lavellan said something.

“Yes. I will not let them.”

He splintered into a thousand stars of shadows on the bright and luminous sky.

Lavellan lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

The thick plottens. Lmao at Cole though.

Lavellan: *feverish and convulsing*

Solas and Varric: get a doctor!

Cole: nah he's fine lol

Sometimes a (chaotic) family is a tired saviour, an ancient 'god', a roguish dwarf, and their spirit son.

I drew Lavellan! Quite happy with how it turned out. -->

<https://noverturemusings.tumblr.com/post/625983011475849216/worship-weighs-like-bone-slides-like-honey-and>

Hunt across but never ahead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

absent eyes rise from the dead—

"You are a man who willingly drinks poison."

"What of it? You are what you eat, after all."

His eyes opened and he cried out because he couldn't move, couldn't shift, couldn't breathe. What was this? This was wrong!

"[Ma halani](#), ^[1]" he wept, whimpered, wilted. "Ma halani."

His hands reached— Hands. He stared at them, clenched them and clawed at his skin and tried to peel the layers back. Where was he? Where were they?

Shadows spilled from peeling skin and who had trapped him? What curse was this? He would rend chaos upon them, chaos the likes of which they'd never seen. Who had placed him in this realm? This horrifying, *unchanging*, *putrid*, realm!

"Who dares?" he demanded.

Someone pried his clawing fingers away from his skin, and little by little, the colours filled the hazy outlines of this terrible world. The ceiling above was bare, wooden, blank, steep, the stones comprising this fortress as old as ancient sin. Older. Further back. Broken and reassembled by eyes that didn't know what they'd desecrated in their ignorance.

He stared at the one holding his hands, and gasped in relief.

"Compassion," he breathed. "Compassion, help. Compassion—" He tried to rise but Compassion shook its head and eased him back down onto something soft. Compassion was as unchanging as this nightmare of a realm. He thrashed, bared his teeth and hissed, "What is the meaning of this?"

Sharp, flickering sensations. He wrenched his hands away from Compassion and clutched at his head. His head? That was right. Head. Face. His trembling hands ran over it, over the skin, the ridge of nose, the brush of eyebrows and lashes, the chapped skin of lips. He traced the familiar lines of his devotion branded onto his skin, but he couldn't feel where they were and no, was he barefaced?

"Where?" he choked out, grasped blindly at his face. No, no, it couldn't be.

"It's alright, it's still there," said Compassion. "It's not the same as it was but it's still there."

"It is?" he asked, voice small and frightened.

"Here," said Compassion and held its arm up. A black shape descended upon it. A raven. Lavellan sobbed in relief.

“Vergala,” he choked out. Heat built in his chest and rose to press behind his eyes. He made a broken noise, reached for her, and she perched upon his chest, a welcome weight. He ran gentle hands over her form. The heat fell from his eyes, clogged his chest. She emanated nothing. No familiar comfort or warmth, but no, it wasn’t her who was emanating nothing. It was him. *He* couldn’t connect.

“Where is it?” he asked, breath hitching in his panic.

“Lavellan,” she cawed and hopped down, settled beside the crook of his neck and pressed herself against him. “Found you. Rest.”

“I hate this realm. Bring me back,” Lavellan ordered, but the thickness of his voice undercut its authority.

“No, you love this world,” said Compassion. “You love it so much that you hold it up without complaining. It’s alright. You can’t go back.”

“You’re not helping!”

“I am. You just won’t see it right now. You said that to me. You have to hurt now, you have to remember, and next time it won’t be like this again.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You do,” it affirmed and Lavellan finally noticed how glacial its eyes were. He.

“You stopped being it,” Lavellan said.

“So did you.”

“What am I?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do I know?”

“No.”

Lavellan roared. His eyes darted everywhere and he rose but Compassion pushed him back down, kept him there no matter how hard he thrashed.

“I’m going to die,” he gasped.

“No.”

“Let me go!”

“No.”

“I’m useless like this!”

“No.”

Vergala squawked, bit and pulled at a lock of Lavellan’s hair, flew and flapped her wings in his face and cawed in disapproval and he had no need to feel anything from her because she’d made herself clear enough. He stopped struggling and fell back onto the soft surface, the press of heat

overwhelming. His vision blurred. Wet. He wiped it away.

“Compassion, *please*,” he begged.

There were whispers in the back of his mind.

And they were afraid.

Another pulse of pain stabbed at his head and he closed his eyes, scrunched his brows, whimpered.

“It’s okay,” eased Compassion. “Knocking in the night, no fear of the dark. Let it in. Through. She said to drink from the glass so you won’t drown in the ocean. It’s okay.”

“I see it,” I say. “You turn me into art.”

He is solid, moving and acting with such precision. Violet eyes.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“I am—”

Gone.

Lavellan’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and all was dark again.

He awoke sore all over, aching from his knuckles to the muscles between his ribs, all the way to his jaw. It took him a beat to recognise his surroundings as his quarters and that he was on his bed. The light outside was dim, but its softness indicated dawn, not dusk, and there was a weight in his hand. He lifted his hand, found that his fingers had wrapped so tight around his stone that it took some time for him to uncurl them. Dried blood beneath his nails. Sore fingertips. Someone had wrapped bandages around his forearms, patches of red staining the dressing.

Vergala was asleep and nestled beside his pillow, head turned, beak buried in the feathers of her back.

Vergala.

His throat dried. Fragments from before returned.

“Cole?” he rasped, franticness descending upon his tone. “Cole?”

“I’m here.”

Lavellan relaxed. Cole appeared beside him, carrying a glass of water, which he lifted to Lavellan’s lips. He finished the glass in three greedy gulps, some cognisance returning to him, and laid his head back on the pillow, contemplated the ceiling above him.

This was what Memory had warned him about. The first instance of his memories returning.

It answered nothing.

Save one.

“Cole?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“Yes?”

Lavellan paused, hesitated. Then, asked, “Am I a spirit?”

Cole's gaze felt as though it were disassembling him. “Not anymore. You're more, now.”

Lavellan let out a small, quaking breath, covered his eyes with his arm and bit his lip until it hurt.

“Did I possess this body? Was there ever a Mahanon of Clan Lavellan?” he asked, bitterness seeping into it.

“Yes,” said Cole. “You. You've always been Mahanon. That's your name. One of them.”

One of—

This was too much. This was... First, the world had slapped an unknown mark of magical origin on him, had made him its Herald, then, it'd made him fight as its Inquisitor. He'd bound himself to Mythal, had killed an ancient darkspawn magister, had fallen for the Dread Wolf who'd broken his heart, then he'd fought and killed the stupid Wolf, then he'd been thrown back in time to do it all over again.

And *now* he was a fucking spirit?

He pressed the heel of his palms into his eyes.

What was he the spirit of?

Lavellan's eyes snapped open and he scrambled up, unsteady on his feet, supported by Cole. He fumbled for the drawer and opened it

He stared at the tarot card from the Fade.

The two-headed raven had shifted. Both heads were now looking at him with unblinking, unerring, unnerving eyes. Lavellan reached for the card with shaking hands and held it tight, stared at the word written on the banner.

Change.

“Fuck.”

“I didn't let him forget,” said Cole, watching Skyhold waking below them. Dawn had passed, given way to morning.

Lavellan looked up from buttoning his coat.

“Who?” he asked.

“Varric forgot because he’ll worry, ask, but I made Solas remember.”

His panic bubbled. “Why?” he hissed. “I can’t have him asking questions either.”

“You don’t have to tell him. I told him it’ll hurt you if he asks, so he won’t ask, but he has to remember.”

“Why?” he asked again.

Cole stared at him. “*Fresh fit of fear, feverish and delirious in my arms. He is mortal. I could lose him.* He carried you here. I had to convince him to leave your side. You told me people have to remember sometimes. He has to remember so he doesn’t hide behind anger. He’s just scared because you’re making him doubt.”

“That’s not an excuse,” he said, but his heart still gave a small kick.

“No,” agreed Cole. “But now, he knows where the anger came from. He’s hurting, too. I’ll try to help both of you.”

“That’s a large undertaking, Cole.”

“Yes. Both whispering, shore on shore, waves the size of the world in his, still lake stretching into the dark in yours. But I’ll try.”

Lavellan fixed his cuffs, asked carefully, “Can I keep making him doubt?”

“Probably. Gentle but forceful, finding the faults and lines like an arrow sinking in the space between the plates. Not as wise as he thought. Watching the arrow sink deeper and wishing it ends or saves him. You can keep pushing. But you have to push right.”

“Keep hunting the Wolf,” Lavellan murmured.

He dusted off the front of his coat, ready to show the Inquisition their capable Inquisitor once more, and stared at himself in the mirror.

Gaunt and pale in his golden uniform.

He didn’t know who he was anymore.

“You’re still you,” said Cole.

“Not who I thought I was.”

“Maybe. What does it change?”

“What does it— Everything!” He pulled at his hair and turned away from his reflection, mind whirling, heart swelling, chest tightening. Lavellan tore at his collar and gasped for breath, vision tunnelling. Another wave of chills shook him, numbed his fingers, and the world slipped out from beneath him. Threads unravelled. They knotted and caught and tore on the shards of tumult and tears.

The world was falling.

Had to fight. Danger. Had to go, fight, flee, free. He cast his hands out, grabbed, anything to hold him together. Held. Slipped. Smashed.

"It's okay." A blue glow in his periphery, wisps of smoke diffusing off him as Cole took the hurt, gentle hands freeing the threads from the shards, and the tension in him dissipated with every released strand.

His vision widened. Calm descended upon him and he took in a few shuddery breaths.

He was kneeling on the floor, hands covering his face. Lavellan looked up and blinked blearily.

Glass shards were littering the carpet in front of him, his mirror broken, had smashed it in his distress. Blood dripped from his knuckles. A hundred scattered pieces of his reflection stared back at him.

Cole knelt beside him and cleaned the blood off his knuckles while Vergala flew onto his lap.

"Nothing was a lie," said Cole. "You came here to help."

"I don't even remember that," he whispered, looked at Cole, and wished he were a stronger person. Wished he could just stand and go about his day and tackle this all with finesse instead of crumbling and failing to function and being a general waste of space. "Am I like you then? I came here because Mahanon needed help and I just kept believing I was Mahanon?"

Cole frowned. "You *are* Mahanon." He shook his head and wrapped Lavellan's knuckles. "You're not really a spirit. Not anymore. A space, not a slide. You still answer the call of what you used to be. You do it and you don't even realise it. Like when Aenoreir wanted to charge through the path and take down the deer but you used the river and came back faster. Clever. That's why they wanted you to lead." Cole finished wrapping his knuckles and stared at the broken mirror. "But you're more now. You don't just make change. You move *with* the change, make yourself into whatever you have to so you survive. Now you change again. But that's okay. That's just you."

Lavellan scoffed, but it sounded weak. "Some would say that's fake or fickle."

He tilted his head in genuine confusion. "Because it's not them. It's you."

"Cryptic as always, Cole," said Lavellan, but it managed to make him laugh. Maybe Cole was right. Lavellan survived, that was what he did best. Nothing stayed the same — situations always changed, an upheaval in the established order. Either ride the currents of the river or smash into the rocks. That was what the old Warleader used to say.

"He yelled a lot because he lost his son when he wasn't looking," said Cole. "You can be a good successor if you stopped asking so many questions. You brought back the druffalo, all of you dragging it across the forest, and he wanted to weep. *He did it. I knew he could do it.* You cried when he died."

Lavellan closed his eyes. The old Warleader was the closest he'd had to a father figure.

"Mahanon, quit worrying about the shemlens across the river. You can't even drag your damn foot fast enough after you sidestep! You have another problem in front of you. Deal with that first. Now get up and hold your sword properly."

"I don't like swords, I like daggers."

"If you can't even skewer an unmoving piece of wood with a sword, what makes you think you can hit it with something shorter? Again. Unless you want to get stabbed through the gut by the halla you're riding."

Creators, Lavellan had wanted to stab that man sometimes.

But he'd been right. Worrying about the weapon for the next hunt would get him gutted by a ram in the current one. Many questions were raging in his mind but he would learn them all, one by one, at whatever pace they deemed to reveal themselves to him. Right now, he had more salient concerns. The Inquisition needed him and he had to stand, lead, give others the subtle pushes they needed.

Sink his arrows deeper into Solas.

He gently urged Vergala to his arm and she followed. She was familiar. Another mystery for him to solve, but for now, he could use the magnificent extent of her abilities.

“You know, we should take up Dagna’s offer on that spy gear, hm?”

She cawed in agreement.

“She wants you to stop holding back,” said Cole. “She knows faces. Knows names. She’ll come when you need her, wherever you are. She’s never far from you. Never again.”

Lavellan stared at her, turned that new information in his head.

“We’ll figure out what our connection is later,” said Lavellan and he smiled. “But for now, think you can do something for me, clever girl?”

She cawed enthusiastically.

“Assemble the War Council. It’s time to go to the Exalted Plains.”

Creators, what a mess.

Lavellan scanned the Exalted Plains from his vantage point atop the remnants of the elven bridges, lips pursed in his displeasure at how the civil war had ravaged this land so. The Dirthavaren. The Promise. Remnants of the Elvhen were stronger here. Remnants of the Elven too. This wretched place where they'd called an Exalted March upon his people.

One day, the elves wouldn't be the footstone that all these bloodthirsty and closed-minded fools would track their muddy feet on. Wouldn't be the sandbags that they would plunge their rusting swords into.

One day.

Today, though, demons were everywhere. The trees were skeletal, blackened and thin, and an orange haze had blanketed the skies and the land.

He descended and returned to camp, ignored Solas. He ignored Lavellan in turn. Occasionally, he'd shoot Lavellan a quick look. Cole would glance between the two of them and frown to himself as if he were stuck on a puzzle.

“This place is like a ghost town,” muttered Blackwall, oiling his sword.

“Too many people hurting, harming, hacking open a hole for the demons to pour in,” said Cole.
“Why did they have to fight?”

“Yeah, can you... not do *that* a lot?” Bull asked.

“*Tama, how will I follow the Qun?* Her hands, strong but gentle, ruffles stubs where the horns will be,” said Cole, voice low and eyes glazing. “*You are strong and your mind is sharp. You will solve problems others cannot.* She smiles, but sadly.”

“Exactly like that,” Bull grumbled and crossed his arms. “Looks like my old Tamassran was wrong. Bet she’s pissed one of her kids went Tal-Vashoth.”

“Agents with hushed tones. Eyes stinging, forms to fill out, course corrections, reduce risk of similar losses. I remember the little boy, too wise, eager to help. Words break in small secret spaces. *He got away. He got away.*”

The camp quieted and stared at Cole, then at the Iron Bull, who was holding himself in a way that screamed of false confidence.

“How could you know that?” Bull asked, soft. “You’ve never even met her.”

“Your hurt touches hers.”

“Well. That’s, uh, creepy.” He hesitated, uncrossed his arms, and turned away to sort out his supplies. “But... thanks.”

Cole smiled.

Solas observed Cole, brows furrowed, then directed that look at Lavellan. He kept ignoring Solas. Why had Lavellan even brought him? Dorian was here, so it wasn’t as if they were lacking mages.

Their team readied themselves. Cassandra had wished to come, but her shield arm was still giving her trouble and Varric’s ribs still needed time to heal, so those two were under strict orders to stay at Skyhold.

Lavellan’s attention fell on the small war horn hanging from Bull’s belt and the dragon carving looped around its strap. Blackwall had the phoenix wrapped securely around his scabbard. Cole’s rabbit dangled from the button of the pouch that housed his throwing knives, and Dorian came out of his tent, tucking the ouroboros he’d turned into a necklace beneath his shirt. And of course, Solas with the wolves on his staff.

“Is everybody ready?” Lavellan asked, rolling in his warm affections at the fact that everybody had kept his carvings and were even displaying it.

“I can already smell the dead bodies from here,” chirped Dorian. “You take me to the most charming places.”

“Begging pardon, Dorian. I’d ask Orlais to stop shitting up the place but I have a feeling that they’ll either shiv me or give me a bucket so that I can mop their floors.”

“You really hate Orlais, huh?” asked Bull.

“Servant with a hand-shaped bruise on her neck,” said Cole. “Leers following a young man with fair hair and beautiful eyes. They don’t see me They see the ears. Stepping, spitting, stealing what makes them people. Servants, not slaves. She cries as he pushes her and grabs her by the ears like a

horse to be broken. *Stop, please—*”

“Maker,” breathed Blackwall.

“That,” said Lavellan, voice low, “is why I hate Orlais. Next question?”

They looked away save Solas and Cole, who hadn't been looking at him in the first place. Lavellan met Solas' gaze briefly, but soon turned and walked away.

“I serve the rightful emperor of Orlais—”

Lavellan resisted rolling his eyes because at this rate, they were going to roll right out of his sockets, pick up his daggers, and stab Lavellan in the kidneys, and he wouldn't even fight it.

“Listen,” said Lavellan, running out of patience, “we're not here for the civil war. We're here to figure out why people are dying and why the dead are rising. Specifically, why *your* dead are rising. So, let's make this a little easier, soldier. What's happened, in less than five words?”

The chevalier stuttered, frowned at Lavellan. “I don't—”

“Do you speak to your commanding officers in paragraphs?”

“No.” He eyed Lavellan's armour, which looked somewhat official, and amended, “Uh, ser.”

“Ser,” he scoffed. “Go on. Tell me.”

The chevalier looked down, hopefully pilfering through the unnecessary declarations of allegiance and getting to the damn point. “Rising dead, no soldier contact...?”

“Are you asking me or are you telling me?”

He snapped to attention. “Rising dead, no soldier contact!”

Somebody snickered behind him. Dorian, probably.

“Five words,” mused Lavellan. “Very good. And what do you want us to do about it? I'll give you some leeway. Six words.”

“How is that a leeway?” Blackwall wondered beneath his breath.

“Pretty generous leeway,” Bull said with an amused shrug.

“Retake... and secure... ramparts.” The chevalier counted on his fingers. “Contact soldiers.” Then he smiled, proud of himself. Lavellan acquiesced.

“Alright, done. We'll get rid of your demon problem and re-establish contact lines. You go find your nearest garrison and stay there until we clean up this mess.”

“Oh, thank you. Ser.”

“*Inquisitor*,” said Dorian. “It's Inquisitor, you poor sod. Now run along before you burst an artery.”

His eyes boggled. “Inquisitor? The knife-ear who—”

Lavellan narrowed his eyes. The chevalier stopped talking.

“You best be going,” Solas advised, the hints of a threat in his voice, and the chevalier took one look at the mages and their staves, Lavellan and his tattoos and ears, the giant Qunari, the brooding warrior, and nodded shakily. He ran off.

Lavellan let him run for a few metres before he whistled for Vergala. She perched on his waiting arm.

“Follow him. Lead us to the garrison later.”

She cawed and took flight and Lavellan drew his daggers, crossed the bridge into one of the ramparts. It was in poor state. Rubble on the floor, planks of broken wood, blood smeared on the sandbags. Fallen weapons. Crushed armour. Broken arrows. Gangrenous hand. He pulled a face at the smell.

War always made such a mess of things. Waste of life. Waste of everything.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you this surly before,” said Dorian.

“This place doesn’t put me in a good mood, no,” he admitted. “Neither do chevaliers.”

“Why?”

Lavellan crouched and examined the relatively fresh trail of blood. Too dark, congealed. Blood of an undead, then. He peered at the winding paths of the ramparts ahead.

“Do you know what the chevaliers do for their final test in the academy?” Lavellan asked.

“I assume some sort of overblown ceremony? Moving through the steps of a ridiculously named manoeuvre like *Bear Mauls the Wolves*?”

Lavellan stood. “They go into the streets of Halamshiral’s slums and slaughter elves.”

The silence that fell upon the group was as oppressive as the lingering aura of death and taste of rot.

“They what?” asked Dorian, voice faint. “They can’t do that!”

“Why not? They’re chevaliers. An elf wronged a lord here, an elf insulted the honour of a comte there, someone’s staying out past curfew. Does it matter if it’s true? Chevaliers are the noble, shining beacons of honour and valour. Anything they do is in the name of Orlais.”

He looked back at them. They shuffled in the discomfort.

“Yeah. Uncomfortable, isn’t it?” Lavellan asked, not unkindly. “And I can’t do a damn thing.” He turned.

“Not yet,” said Cole. “It’s a promise, burning dark in your mind. You want to channel your anger, choose to change it. They won’t say thank you and they won’t know you helped, but that’s not why you do it.” He looked down, said softly, “That’s not why we do it.”

The space between Lavellan’s shoulder blades itched from Solas’ stare.

“Not yet,” Lavellan promised. In this land of the promise.

The undead cropped up and they fell back into the rhythm of things, the almost monotonous motions of the fight. Lavellan doused himself in fire, the glow of the runes on his daggers flashing as they cleaved a line of cleansing light through the walking corpses.

Lavellan hated the ramparts. The number of times they'd run into dead-ends or sharp blockades wasn't charming, and it wasn't like the undead and the demons would wait for them to draw up a map and navigate with that.

The Arcane Horror and the pile of dead bodies were the toppings on this failure of a cake.

Needless to say, being barraged by spiritual energy hurt like a charm and it worsened his mood. Lavellan opened a sunder and let Bull land the killing blow on it.

Blackwall helped Lavellan up. “You alright?” he asked.

“Never been better,” Lavellan muttered. Blackwall laughed and patted him on the back. “Someone please burn the pit of dead bodies.”

The smell. Reminded him of—

“No,” Cole whispered, stopped the threads from catching on the jagged edges. “It's not the same. You're here. You're not there. You won't be there again.”

Lavellan let out a shaky breath. “Thank you, Cole.”

Dorian and Solas destroyed the barriers and set fire to the bodies so that they couldn't be possessed by spirits, but the rot was still stuck to Lavellan's skin. Bull blew the large war horn and signalled the clear for the soldiers.

They spent a few more minutes dragging undead bodies to the burning pit. The smell got so terrible at one point that Solas had to place a magical dome around the pit to block the stench. In that time, soldiers fighting for Gaspard had arrived to reclaim the ramparts.

“Inquisitor.”

Lavellan turned and met with a soldier, appraised his uniform and armour. Just a common soldier, not a chevalier. Corporal rank?

He was proven right when the soldier knocked his fist to his breast plate in salute and said, “I greet you. My name is Corporal Rosselin.” To Lavellan's profound relief, he didn't start declaring which side he was fighting for and who the rightful ruler was.

“Corporal,” Lavellan returned. “We've taken the barrier down around the pits. There should be no undead rising here now.”

“I fear this is not the only rampart where the undead are rising from. We hear Fort Revasan requires assistance. I would go but...” He assessed the soldiers piling in, a majority injured. “If Your Worship could continue assisting us? For now, we will ensure the surrounding area is clear from the demons and those Maker-forsaken deserters.”

“Freemen of the Dales,” Lavellan said, unimpressed.

Corporal Rosselin sighed. “Yes. Them.”

“Alright, we’ll find Fort Revasan.”

“I’ll see if I can find a map.”

Lavellan eyed the skies. Vergala’s familiar shape approached.

“No need,” he said and put his arm up so she could perch on it.

“Demons,” she cawed. “Soldiers fighting demons.”

“Know where to go?”

“Know where to go.”

He let her perch on his shoulders.

Corporal Rosselin eyed Vergala in wonder. “It speaks?”

“Kind of. Be well, Corporal.” Lavellan nodded at his team and they exited the ramparts. If Lavellan walked faster than seemed warranted as the eyes of the soldiers and chevaliers fell on him (and lingered far too long on his face and ears), then it was largely justified. No one stopped or harassed him though. They owed their victory to him.

Once they were out of the ramparts, he breathed easier. Vergala flew off his shoulders and led them.

“Well, you were behaved in front of that Corporal this time,” said Dorian. “No ordering anyone to speak in six words or less.”

“He didn’t start the conversation by announcing that he was fighting for the rightful ruler of the throne. My standards are actually very low.”

“Yet very specific,” said Solas. First thing he’d said to Lavellan in days.

“If they’re going to be low, I may as well be picky with them.”

They passed by a village that had been ransacked by the fighting, buildings crumbled, remnants of fire licking at what little fuel they could attain. Lavellan entered what used to be a house. Now nothing but broken walls and rubble floors. Toppled shelves. Burnt beds. He crouched by the corner, pushed slabs of concrete out of the way, and picked up a doll in a sooty blue gown. Blood on the fabric.

Lavellan hoped the village had been evacuated.

Blackwall stood behind him, looking at the doll in Lavellan's hand. “This was the front of the civil war,” he murmured, sorrowful.

They walked out. Lavellan carried the doll with him until they reached what sparse forest remained on the plains and picked a few flowers along the way. Lavellan placed the doll and the flowers within the hollow of a tree before moving on.

Soon, Fort Revasan greeted them. Lavellan recognised the chevalier from earlier fighting off a demon with his fellow soldiers. There was an Arcane Horror there. Creators, they were going to get themselves killed.

“Dorian, barrier on the soldiers, Solas on us.”

Lavellan and his group swept in and cut the demons down with the efficiency and skill they'd accrued from fighting these damn things too much. Not that it was the demons' faults. Most of them were spirits that had been forcefully thrown into this world, twisted from the shock.

"Inquisitor," the chevalier from earlier greeted. Wheezed more like. He had a gash over his brow, bleeding over his swollen eye. He held himself strange. Broken ribs? "Thank you."

He nodded. "Come. We'll open the fort. We can get someone to see to your ribs."

The chevalier nodded, face pale.

Fort Revasan opened and in they went. So many of Gaspard's troops were here, but right now, there was no *Gaspard's forces* or *Celene's forces*. There were only dying soldiers and trapped soldiers.

They asked someone to lead them to whoever their superior was. Masked faces followed their movement as they made their way through.

"Revasan," Lavellan said as he watched the haggard soldiers, fraught and taut and wishing they were either dead or free or victorious. "How ironic."

"Why's that?" asked Bull.

"Means 'where freedom dwells' except... Well, not exactly freedom at the moment. They're holed up in here."

Their gazes lingered on his vallaslin. Lavellan was used to it, in another life, but he'd gotten comfortable again, surrounded by the more accepting in Skyhold. He shot those staring soldiers a look and smiled a certain way, knew that would make the vallaslin shift and make it look alive. The soldiers looked away.

"Please stop scaring them," sighed Dorian.

"I don't tolerate their staring. Not when I'm here mopping up the mess they made on our front door."

"It has not been your front door for many centuries," remarked Solas. "I believe that was the whole point of the Exalted March."

Lavellan sent him a cold side-eye. "Does it feel nice being right about something again?"

He frowned, gaze turning steely. "Mock if you will. That does not erase the truth of the statement no matter how loud the Dalish yell that the Dales are theirs."

"If we don't yell, the world will drown us out. Kindly shut the fuck up about things you don't understand or didn't go through."

At least he didn't argue further. Blackwall coughed. Dorian and Bull shared an uncomfortable look and Lavellan sighed.

"Come on," he mumbled. "Let's go meet the Marshal."

Marshal Proulx caught them up on the situation at the Exalted Plains and he winced at its state. Admittedly, he couldn't remember the details from before. All he knew was that the dead were rising from the pits in the ramparts and it was somehow tied to the Freeman. Maybe. He couldn't

be sure.

“Let’s get back to camp soon. It’s almost twilight. Don’t want to be caught dead in the dark with the demons about. We’re going to need help with all the ramparts so I’ll send for the others.”

“Freemen have taken the eastern ramparts,” said Blackwall. “You also have the Victory Rise ramparts,”

“Riverside Garrison too,” said Lavellan. “Got the stranded troops on the other side of the bridge. Soldier effects to recover. We need everyone, especially if the eastern ramparts are guarded by the living. The living can think and strategise.”

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” asked Bull.

“Hopefully not past the month.”

“I dearly hope so.” Dorian sniffed. “I would hate to miss the First Day celebration at Skyhold.”

“Lady Josephine would throw a fit if you weren’t there,” Blackwall said with a warm chuckle.

Lavellan was sure she would. “If it can’t be helped then it can’t be helped. Well, that’s our goal then. Get everything here sorted out before the end of this wretched year, go celebrate 9:42, and hope it doesn’t kick us in the ass as bad as this year had.”

“You going to terrorise people with your mask and cloak again?” Bull asked, smiling.

Lavellan grinned. “I’m a little too obvious this time since nobody’s wearing them.”

“Were you ever caught that night?” Dorian asked.

He recalled the soft moonlight, the teasing conversation, Solas slipping Lavellan’s mask off, his tender smile tinged with sorrow as he’d claimed whatever reward he’d had in mind that night.

“Maybe,” he said and didn’t spare Solas a look.

Lavellan frowned at his daggers, the firelight glinting off its edge. He inspected it to make sure it didn't have nicks that could weaken its structural integrity. It seemed alright. His leather coat was fraying though. No good. He patted himself down and made sure he had no hidden injuries. As it was, he was fine. A few bruises and scratches but nothing that a healing potion and magic couldn't fix.

Cole sat beside him, the carved rabbit in his hand.

“Be careful,” he said. “Tonight. There’s no water on the shore. That means it’s pulling back. Coming cold and careful so you should probably watch out.”

Lavellan stared at him. “When?”

“Your dreams.”

He stood and sat beside Solas next and they engaged in a hushed conversation. Lavellan looked

away so he wouldn't end up staring at Solas because that way lay trouble.

Dorian collapsed next to him on the log. "Truly lovely day we've had," he grumbled.

He snorted. "Simply spectacular. The demons were my favourite part."

"They were the *only* part, Inquisitor." He paused. "Oh, well, I suppose we had the Orlesians. You bossing that chevalier around was the true highlight of this dreadful day."

Lavellan laughed and shoved him away.

"Yeah, that was great," said Bull. He crossed his arms and mimicked Lavellan's voice. Not that his impressions were any good. They never were. "*What's happened? In less than five words?*"

Dorian did the same and glowered theatrically. "*I'll give you some leeway. Six words.*"

Even Blackwall joined in. "Oh this one was my favourite. *Do you speak to your commanding officer in paragraphs?*"

The three guffawed. Lavellan hunched and pulled his coat up over his head as best as he could and slid down the log, attempted to be one with the ground.

"Traitors, the lot of you," Lavellan said. Four out of five of them, actually. Once Lavellan realised that Dorian was the only one who'd remained loyal or honest here, he almost laughed with them. He stood. "I'm going to bed."

"His ears are red," cooed Dorian.

"Trick of the light," Lavellan grunted and entered the tent.

"We'll start using five words or less," promised Bull.

"Suck my dick."

"What, now?"

Lavellan snapped the tent flap shut and harrumphed at the laughter outside, but couldn't help the smile growing on his lips.

Once silence fell in the camp, back to soft whispers, Cole's clear voice said, "Rings of light and lilted laughs. I wanted them to know how much they mean so I gave them some of myself and they wear it on their hearts. Maybe I can do it. I lead but they guide, constellations, and they know I'd die for them."

Silence.

Then, a collective cooing.

"Shut up!" Lavellan screeched. He grabbed the nearest item, which turned out to be a spare belt, and hurled it out the tent flap. They laughed anew. He huffed and buried himself in the bedroll.

Lavellan had meant to retreat as a joke, but his exhaustion bowled him over and it didn't take long for him to fall asleep, lulled by the soft conversations outside.

He awoke beneath the stars.

Lavellan frowned, sat up with a groan and looked around him. Still at camp. The fire had been reduced to coal and soft embers, his friends asleep in their bedrolls. Lavellan looked down. He was in his roll too. No, hadn't he been in the—

He turned but there was only the forest behind him.

Tent...?

Strange.

Lavellan looked back at his companions and relaxed at their serene faces. He was about to settle in and sleep again but a caw caught his attention. Vergala perched on a nearby tree. She blinked, eyes golden.

“Vergala?” he asked.

She flew into the forest.

“Wait, come back,” he said, wrangled himself out of the bedroll.

There was only one moon, its light golden. A full eclipse. Its rays gilded the edges of the leaves and dripped down the great trunks. Lavellan entered the forest. The golden moonlight turned scarlet but Lavellan pushed on, searching for Vergala before she could get hurt.

Faces shifted in the trunks, wrinkles forming eyes, noses, moving mouths. They spoke yet made no sound. Sap dripped from their lips — deep and honeyed and gold. The faces moved as he passed. Chanting, singing, greeting.

Lavellan ignored them.

The faces wept silver.

Lavellan turned at a gnarled tree and found a cloaked figure beneath the tree that Vergala had perched on. He paused. The figure had their back to him, wearing a cloak of raven feathers, the hood pulled over their head.

Vergala cawed at him. She flew deeper into the forest and the cloaked figure followed her.

Lavellan's heart lurched. He cast his hands out. “Wait!”

They did not wait.

He and the cloaked figure moved at the same pace but the distance somehow increased. Lavellan ran, but the distance stretched further, further, yet the cloaked figure always remained within sight. Always in the corner of his vision. Like a word he'd forgotten, on the tip of his tongue. Every movement made the cloak of feathers seem alive under the crimson moonlight.

“Who are you?” he called out.

The faces in the trees clicked their mouths open and close as if someone had winded their jaw. Almost as if they were laughing. Their eyes rolled to the back of their head and revealed another set of eyes with owlsh proportions, rings of psychedelic colour within them dripping and leaking

over the silver.

Lavellan chased the figure in the cloak of feathers.

They had answers. Lavellan wanted it. Could taste it on his lips as he licked them, felt them with every press of his bare feet against the dry leaves. He tore through the forest with the swiftness of a gale. Not that it mattered.

“Wait!” he called out again. “Come back.”

The moon fell from the sky.

The figure stopped at a clearing at last, right in the middle as the sky devoured the falling moon. The red moonlight faded and the figure turned.

The faces in the trees laughed shrilly.

Before darkness set, Lavellan saw the figure’s face.

They had none.

Lavellan woke up, out of breath.

Chapter End Notes

Et voilà.

We're in the Dales at last. It's gonna be FUN. It's gonna be GREAT. Lavellan is going to ~~be STRESSED~~ have so much FUN.

Me @ me: chill with the raven imagery and ominous dreams

Also me, grabbing at it like a little gremlin and shoving it into my slimy gremlin bag: It's for art!!!

(I am once again crippled by Solas feels. This is not fun. Please, you stupid wolf, let me rest. Mans is practically living in my mind rent-free. NOT IN THIS ECONOMY! Pay your rent.)

Translation:

[1] **Ma halani:** Help me^[1]

The war-torn plains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

disgraced home of ours—

When Iron Bull awoke and stepped out of his tent, Lavellan was already up and preparing the pheasant.

“Mercy,” he greeted, voice rough from sleep. “Morning.”

“Morning,” he said, grave as he methodically cut the meat, hand steady even if he didn’t feel it. Not after the dream. Whatever that was. “How do we feel about smoked pheasant for breakfast?”

“Sounds good.” He sat and frayed one end of a stick and chewed on it to clean his teeth, scrutinised Lavellan as he did. “You didn’t sleep well,” he noted after an extended silence, threw the stick away.

Lavellan grunted but said nothing else. Cole was at the edge of the camp, had been there to help after Lavellan had woken up. Either Blackwall or Solas would wake soon. Dorian always woke last. The pheasant was done by the time everybody was up.

“So what’s on the agenda today?” Blackwall asked.

“Ramparts are out of the question,” Lavellan said. “We need everyone here along with a few more forces and I swear to every god that exists out there, if I see Varric and Cassandra with them, I’m going to break their shins.” They better be resting. He’d specified in his letter for them to sit still and not come.

“Cassandra would break your shins first and Varric would distract you with a story,” said Bull.

Lavellan hesitated. “Okay, maybe Cassandra, but Varric can’t distract me.”

“Mercy, not sure if you noticed, but stories distract you really quickly.”

“They don’t.”

“I had a wonderful dream, Inquisitor,” Solas piped up. “I dreamt of a ruin in our vicinity. I believe them to have been ancient baths used by the Elvhen.”

He frowned at Solas. “Nearby?”

“I believe so, yes.”

Bull laughed. “See?”

Lavellan stemmed the tide of questions about to pour forth from him and he turned his head away with a huff. “You set me up,” he accused Solas.

“I did no such thing. I truly did dream of the ancient baths. They were the favourite baths of one of Ghilan’nain’s High Priests, I believe.”

The whole camp stayed quiet as Lavellan steadfastly ignored him, sawed through the cooked meat of the pheasant, pursed his lips. No, stories did not distract him, thank you very much. So what if it had been a High Priest of Ghilan'nain's favourite bath? What did that even mean? A favourite bath? A favourite communal bath? What would have made it so special that they preferred it over the others?

Lavellan stilled his cutting and hung his head with a defeated sigh.

“And what exactly made this bath preferable over the others?”

Bull leaned back with a smug grin and Lavellan cursed him out. Still, his worrying dream disappeared from his mind. Momentarily at least. Better than nothing.

The next day, his companions arrived at the Plains. Cassandra and Varric alighted from the recently arrived wagon.

Lavellan rolled up his sleeves and grabbed Bull's battle axe, which had been leaning against the requisition table.

Varric held his hands up in a calming gesture. “Wait, wait, wait!”

“Go back,” said Lavellan and hefted the axe over his shoulder. It was heavy, but he could manage the weight for a few minutes.

“Get the axe away from him!” Varric cried.

“I told you to rest,” he said.

Varric hid behind Cassandra. She crossed her arms. Sera cackled.

“We are not here to fight,” Cassandra said. “But we will lend our help in other matters requiring strategy.”

Lavellan squinted at them.

“Fine,” he said and returned the axe.

“You didn't even take it off him,” Varric cried at Bull.

He shrugged. “It was funny.”

Sera all but vaulted off her wagon and leapt at Lavellan, knobby knees and sharp elbows digging into him as she wrapped her limbs around him in a hug. He staggered back.

“Heya, Quisitree,” she said and jumped off him.

“I'm sorry, what did you just call me?”

“What? Quisitree? Inquisitor, tree. All tough and barky outside but got sap inside,” she said as if it made perfect sense. “Clever, innit?”

“Tree,” he sighed. Throw that one in with the pile of nicknames. “Anyone else want to give me a nickname while we’re at it?”

“Five,” said Dorian as he passed by.

“How about: Six,” said Blackwall.

“Nah, both,” said Bull. They looked at each other.

“Fifty-six,” they said in unison.

Varric frowned. “What?”

“Oh have we got a story for you,” said Bull. “Come here, let me tell you all about it.”

Maybe Lavellan would retire early after all.

“Oh!” said Sera. “Widdles has a present for you!” She ran back into the wagon, then came out and shoved a bow and a quiver into his hands. Lavellan ogled at the wood she'd used. Ironbark, the Dalish's preferred crafting material. Stronger and lighter than steel, versatile, and the weight and feel of it was so familiar in his hand. Just like home.

He held it tight. Gods, he was homesick.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

“Don't thank me. Thank her,” said Sera. “Look what she got me!” She produced a bottle from her pack. A viscous, dark red liquid swirled inside along with orange licks of smoke. “It's all sticky when it burns.”

“Creators, she gave you *Antivan fire*?”

“Heard you were dealing with icky dead things and icky dead things hate fire. Problem solved.”

The camp was soon bustling with activity from the arrivals. Vivienne stepped out of her carriage, squinting into the distance, robes as immaculate as always with her intimidating horn-like hennins.

“Such a waste,” she said and clicked her tongue. Lavellan's gaze locked onto the swan carving she'd incorporated into the swirling head of her staff. Somehow. Magic, maybe? He looked back at Sera, who had bounced her way over to annoy Blackwall, the honeycomb still tied around her quiver. Cassandra had her bear tied to the worn and faded pack she'd always carry with her to missions everywhere. Varric had the fox dangling from his quiver strap as usual.

They all had it on their person. Did they collectively plan this or did they all decide individually that they wanted to display it?

He turned and grabbed the map of the Plains before his eyes could get teary.

They had work to do.

They reclaimed the eastern ramparts from the Freeman. It may or may not have involved Sera

lobbing Antivan fire in utter glee and being scolded by Vivienne for it because the ramparts were constructed from *wood* and were thus *flammable*. They also took down the barriers and burned the bodies. Lavellan retrieved a letter from one of the Freemen leaders and scowled at its contents.

“What’ve you got there?” asked Dorian.

“This one, Gordian, was a Venatori,” said Lavellan, showed Dorian the letter. “Planted into the Orlesian army to start shit.”

“And another blighter falls. Truly a good day.”

“We’re not done. This is only a branch of the Freemen. The rest are in the Emerald Graves.”

“Are we going after them?”

Lavellan looked at the Inquisition’s forces and the Orlesian forces returning to retake the ramparts.

“Not yet,” he said. “Still things to do in the Plains.”

Lavellan threw Gordian’s body into the fire.

Bull fell into step beside them as they walked through the retaken ramparts. “Heard a few rumours at Skyhold. Guy called Fairbanks. Says he’s fighting for the refugees there or something. Pretty sure I picked up the Freemen mentioned there somewhere.”

Lavellan suppressed his smile. Fairbanks. Now there was a dependable man.

“We’ll keep an ear out,” said Lavellan.

More Orlesian soldiers returned. He spoke with a few of them, nodded and accepted their gratitude, and walked out feeling as if hands had dragged over his skin.

A few of them had looked at Lavellan like...

He shuddered and hugged himself.

Lavellan walked to somewhere with fresh air. Not that there was any such place nearby. Death and smoke and decay had blanketed the land, thicker than the Veil, which had thinned from seeing so much death and violence.

He arrived at the riverbank. Solas was already there, staring off into the distance with the wind swaying the wolves on his staff. Lavellan stopped, contemplated walking back, but Solas had already noticed his arrival.

A tense silence hung between them.

“Did you need something?” Solas finally asked.

“No,” said Lavellan. “I just wanted to clear my head. I’m used to stares but a few of the Orlesian soldiers look at me like I’m a fuck toy or a floor scrubber. Sometimes both. And I don’t care for that shit at all.”

Solas' disposition darkened and an edge crept into his voice when he asked, “Would you like me to speak to them?”

“You’re an elf too, Solas,” Lavellan reminded.

“They won’t know that.”

Lavellan frowned. “What?”

“Nothing disturbs one more than a vivid and visceral dream,” he said, eyes flickering with promise. “I am not in the habit of imparting nightmares, but I can make exceptions.”

Lavellan stared at Solas, brows raised slightly. “You can do that?”

“I need not do much. The mind does the rest and the Fade willingly follows. The correct nudge will have them waking in a fit of terror.”

“No, don’t.” He shook his head. “I suspect they’ll have nightmares of their own with or without your interference what with the undead and the war. Go do something nicer for yourself when you dream.”

“Ever so merciful,” he muttered and turned away.

Another tense, hostile silence.

Lavellan crossed his arms. “Right, this has got to stop.”

“What?”

“This... Whatever this hostility is. Are you still angry about Cole?”

Solas stayed quiet, Lavellan watched the back of his head.

“I am not,” Solas finally said. “I merely failed to realise you were an expert on spirits and their nature as well! Imagine my surprise.”

“I am trying to hold a constructive and civil discussion with you,” snapped Lavellan. “Is that something you can manage, Solas? Or would you prefer to devolve back into snide remarks and *crude insults* as you put them? Because I can manage just fine with either.”

His grip on the staff tightened, but he did hang his head and the rigid tension in his shoulders slacked. He faced Lavellan, exhaustion pulling at his face. “No,” he said. “Ir abelas, lethallin. I would also like to resolve this calmly.”

Lavellan nodded. “Thank you. Now tell me what’s gotten you so upset about how I handled the situation with Cole.”

“What use is my knowledge if you will not listen to it?” he asked, but it wasn’t accusatory.

“You thought I didn’t listen?” asked Lavellan. “Solas, I wasn’t setting out to claim mastery over your field. And I *did* listen. I listened to you and Varric, and I would’ve gladly explained my train of thought with you both but Cole was sort of on a warpath. By the time I would’ve explained it, that Templar would’ve been dead.”

Solas’ expression strained and Lavellan frowned further.

“No, that’s not quite why you’re upset,” Lavellan mumbled. “Solas, I’m not Cole. I can’t read your mind. You have to work with me here.”

“I—” He rubbed a hand down his face, curbed his tone from rising in pitch again. “I am trying. Talk me through your train of thought then. Perhaps that will help.”

“Okay, well... It’s just— Both of your responses seemed a little extreme. Cole can’t be human. He isn’t human, and we can’t force him to be. But you wanted him to forget about Cole? Not everything can be solved by tearing it down and beginning anew.” Solas turned away to hide his grimace but Lavellan caught it anyway. “Cole is unique, you said so yourself, so we had to take that into consideration. His situation is different. We can’t treat him like the average spirit from the Fade because his experience has changed him. He’s closer to understanding the fundamental differences of the Fade and the waking world than most spirits.”

“But how could you have known that your methods would have helped?” asked Solas. “How could you have known that it wouldn’t have hurt Cole?”

“It’s not *my* method. I just reminded Cole that things aren’t as clear cut as they might initially appear, and I left the choice up to him. Forget or not forget? Who knows? Not spirits, and certainly not us. Nobody knows how anything will go.” Lavellan looked down and scuffed his shoes on the pebbles. “And if I saw I was hurting Cole, I would’ve called on you and Varric immediately. But I just *know* he was capable of so much more. Compassion shouldn’t forget Cole. Not when he played a huge part in influencing Compassion’s nature.”

Solas stared again, scrutinised Lavellan.

“I’ve walked a path a thousand times and more,” he started and Lavellan blinked. “Knew every stone along the way, every blade of grass, the exact distance between the trees, yet one day I notice a small flower. Has it always been there and I’d merely failed to see it? Or was it a new addition? If so, who has placed it there? When? And how? Whichever the answer, it is still startling.”

...What? “I think you’ve been spending a little too much time with Cole.”

Solas sighed. “I am saying that you are the change in the path. It is... a different approach, one which has either existed beforehand and I had failed to realise its presence, or one you have introduced. I have to wonder at the implications of either.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“Unlike you, Inquisitor, I am not unflappable in the face of world-changing information.”

“It’s nice to see my pretence of calm has fooled you. Creators forbid you hear the screaming in my head.” Because it was terribly loud. His face softened. “Was it really that world-changing?”

“You yourself are,” he murmured. “The very moment you stepped out of the Fade.”

Lavellan smiled wryly. “The first or the second time?”

“Both.” A brief flicker of horror and regret flashed in his eyes and Lavellan knew he was recalling the visions. Solas looked down in remorse. “But that is no excuse for my appalling behaviour. I am sorry.”

Lavellan needed a tally for ‘How many times Solas apologised’ right next to another tally for ‘The times his apologies meant jackshit because he did it again or did something worse’. He suspected the numbers would be almost equal.

“I’m Dalish, Solas. I treasure deeds over words.”

“What would you have me do to prove the sincerity of my remorse?”

“Work on not being an asshole?” He turned. “You’re self-aware enough to know when you’re

being disrespectful. You claim to respect me, but you go ahead and do the opposite. Why should I believe you're truly remorseful? You haven't given me much reason to."

To that, Solas had no answer and Lavellan walked away. Let him chew on that.

But before he could leave, Solas called out, "Inquisitor," and Lavellan stopped, looked at him over his shoulder. Solas was frowning at him but the way his brows were pulled suggested worry over displeasure. "Are you... Are you well?"

"Is anyone?" Lavellan asked.

"If you ever feel unwell, tell someone."

He pursed his lips and nodded, turned his head again, but he paused, deliberating over his next words.

"Thank you for carrying me to my quarters," said Lavellan.

Solas' stare prickled on his back as he watched Lavellan go.

Over the week, the Inquisition worked on repairing the bridge while Lavellan and his team reclaimed the Victory Rise ramparts and burned the pits and reclaimed the Riverside Garrison.

Lavellan was also coming dangerously close to stabbing the eyes and cutting out the tongues of a few soldiers for their leers and whispers that weren't as subtle as they thought.

"Did you see that knife-ear leading the Inquisition? Very easy on the eyes."

"They say he's touched. I'll say. If I were the Maker, I'd be touching that too."

"Heard those Dalish can go all night. Might even bite. Should muzzle him."

"Fucking pigs," Lavellan muttered and Vergala cawed in agreement on his shoulder. They returned to the Inquisition camp. Far, *far* away from the ramparts. This was what the slaves of Orlais and Tevinter had to put up with daily. Often worse. Not even seen as people.

"You alright, Mercy?" Bull asked upon his return.

"Orlesians being pigs. Nothing new. Hey, if they want to talk diplomacy again, I don't want to go," he said. "Sic Cassandra on them."

Cassandra was by the fire sharpening her sword and she glanced up, wrist flicking sharp on a stroke.

"Gladly," she said.

"I know a good electric spell," said Dorian. "Will absolutely render their testicles useless henceforth."

"Tempting," said Lavellan. This was reminding him of his time in Tevinter, but it had been worse then. No position as Inquisitor to help him, and plenty of reasons for some of the nobility to hate or

covet him. Or both. Dorian and Maevaris' protection hadn't been enough. If it hadn't been for Solas and his agents' intervention during that one soirée where Lavellan had been either drugged or poisoned, he would have been dead or worse.

His skin crawled. He hugged himself. "How long are we supposed to stay here?" he mumbled.

"It shouldn't be long now, darling," said Vivienne. "Once we have regained contact with the Empress' forces past the bridge, we will return." Her gaze turned steely. "As for speaking with the Orlesian forces, allow me to address them as well."

Lavellan nodded. "Thank you." He grabbed his ironbark bow from his tent and slung his quiver over his back. "I'm going to roam the forest. Clear my head," he said. Before he could shoot a chevalier in the neck. "Am I going to get roasted over the fire if I decide I don't actually want to interact with the Orlesian soldiers anymore?"

"You are the Inquisitor," said Solas. "You need only say the word."

Lavellan squinted at him. Was that a dig? Solas frowned at his suspicious look.

"That was not an insult, Inquisitor." He stood. "But allow me to accompany you. I do not enjoy the idea of you traipsing through the woods alone, not with the danger of unsealed rifts."

He huffed. "You're babysitting me."

"Only if you prove yourself a child."

Dorian dusted his hands off and stood as well. "I'll come!" he chirped. "I would like a change of scenery."

"Hell, maybe I'll come too," said Bull.

"Well if you three are coming, we may as well actively look for and seal rifts."

"When I said change of scenery, I didn't think that involved demons," Dorian sighed.

Lavellan patted him on the back and they set off. Despite the demons, the forest did clear his head. Truthfully, Lavellan was searching for Keeper Hawen's clan nearby. Clan... what was it again? Clan Venalin? Maybe it would curb some of his homesickness. The feeling had exacerbated because of all these Orlesians and their gods-forsaken civil war.

His mind returned to worrying about Clan Lavellan and he gripped the bow tighter.

Dorian and Solas happily (or at least, civilly) chattered about magical theory ahead of them. Bull's lost look grew the more jargon they threw about until he gave up altogether with a grunt and a grumble and slowed so he could walk beside Lavellan.

"Had fun?" Lavellan asked.

"Something, something, ambient, Fade, Veil. Bah! Dalish makes it sound so simple." He mimicked her voice but again, he sucked at impressions. "*I pull, it glows, then it explodes!*" He blinked. "She's talking about archery, by the way."

Lavellan smiled. "Yeah, it's an old elven trick, you wouldn't understand."

"Exactly."

Lavellan chuckled, but his smile faded as he eyed Bull. “You and Dorian tagged along to make sure Solas and I wouldn’t start arguing, didn’t you?”

“Saw through it, huh?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Nah.” Bull ducked from a low branch. “Wanna talk about it?”

“...It’s complicated.”

He winced. “Oh shit, you’re using *that* tone.”

“What?” Lavellan blinked. “What tone?”

All Bull did was pat Lavellan’s shoulder. Lavellan was about to ask but—

“If you wish to make amends for past transgressions, free the slaves of all races who live in Tevinter today,” said Solas.

“I...” Dorian gripped his staff tighter. “Don’t know that I can do that.”

“Then how sorry are you?”

Lavellan shared a look with Bull.

“Well,” said Lavellan, “it’s not me he’s arguing with. Mission accomplished for you.”

Bull grimaced. A tense silence descended over the party.

“So, Mercy!” said Bull, dispelling the sudden quiet. An attempt to make things less awkward. “Been meaning to ask but you don’t have a dominant hand, do you?”

Lavellan went with it because he’d had his fill of cold, hostile silence for the week. “I do,” he said. “Right, but I’ve been trained to use both. Daggers and all. Still, I instinctively use my right.”

“Yeah, but you swap hands with your bow sometimes.”

“My left hand’s usually more dextrous when it comes to archery, but I swap when the Anchor hurts.”

“The Dalish do it by hand dexterity too? Yeah, heard the Vints and Antivans do that. Most people go by the dominant eye.”

“Be honest, are you trying to balance all the magical theory talk from earlier with archery talk?”

Dorian looked back with an amused smile, at least. Small mercies. Bull grunted.

“Listen, I know a lot of things about the weirdest topics. But *that*, I don’t understand. Unless you got it too?”

Lavellan laughed. “No. I know some things about the Fade and the Veil, but not the intricacies of manipulating it. I’m no mage. No matter how many times my sister talks at me about magical theory.”

“There’s a lot of places for crap to go wrong.”

“Don’t fret, you hulking oaf,” said Dorian. “If I’m going to spontaneously combust, I’ll make sure to do it near you.”

“You’re not cute.”

“I believe the term you were looking for is gorgeous.” Dorian waved a hand. “The only gorgeous thing for miles. Although, I suppose the Inquisitor *could* count,” he teased.

Lavellan clicked his tongue. “Wrong adjective for me, Dorian.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Feral.”

“Better,” he said, feigned swooning.

Solas knocked aside a fallen branch in the way with more force than seemed warranted.

Vergala cawed twice above them, followed by a sharp cry and the familiar shriek of a demon. They shared a single look then sprinted to the source of the sound.

They stumbled upon a band of Dalish elves fending off demons and undead, defending a small aravel filled with supplies.

When he said he wanted to meet Clan Venalin, this was *not* what he'd had in mind.

“Dorian, barrier on the Dalish, focus on protecting them. Solas, on us. Let’s go, Bull.”

They charged into the flank of demons. “[On dhea’him^{\[1\]}](#)!” Lavellan greeted the surprised Dalish hunters and swiftly took care of the demons and undead.

After the fight, a hunter approached them. He was old. Too old to still be in a hunting party since most of them retired after fifty, yet the other hunters with him were in their youth, some not even marked with the vallaslin yet. This was also not a large enough group to properly constitute as a hunting party.

“[Ma serannas^{\[2\]}](#), da’len,” said the hunter. “It is relieving to find a fellow Dalish here. I am Olafin of Clan Venalin. Is your clan nearby?” He eyed Lavellan’s companions as they reconvened. Some of the Dalish hunters stayed back, wary eyes trained on them, hands still hovering over their weapons.

“No, hahren, I’m far from my clan,” said Lavellan. “I am Mahanon of Clan Lavellan.”

“Lavellan,” said Olafin, adopting a slight tone of respect. The Lavellan name carried weight as one of the oldest clans with a substantial amount of retrieved lore, and they were also renowned for raising exceptional warriors. No pressure on him or anything. Although, that wasn’t his largest concern anymore, was it?

Now he had a world to look after and an army to lead.

“You keep interesting company, da’len,” said Olafin. Lavellan prayed to any deity that would listen for Solas to behave.

“In truth, I belong to an organisation called the Inquisition,” said Lavellan. “We came here to help with the demons and the undead, and to ease the damage from the civil war. Where are you headed, hahren? I assumed this was a hunting party but...”

Olafin shook his head. “Our Keeper sent us to find safe passage through the Exalted Plains to rejoin the rest of our clan near the Emerald Graves.”

“Hahren,” hissed one of the younger hunters. A dark-haired adolescent girl who carried hunting gear and yet bore no vallaslin, which meant she couldn’t have been older than fifteen. “Why are you telling this stranger so much? He cannot be trusted! He keeps peculiar company!”

Solas snorted softly behind him.

“Hush, Revasha,” Olafin said. “He and his company saved our lives.”

“We could have handled them ourselves!”

“Ah, youth,” murmured Dorian.

“Ir abelas, da’len,” said Lavellan. “It was not our intention to spoil your victory.”

She glared at him, dark eyes flinty. “Don’t call me that.”

Lavellan resisted sighing. “Alright. Well, we could escort you across the Plains—”

“We don’t need your help,” snapped Revasha.

“Revasha!” Olafin scolded.

“He carries the vallaslin and yet he is garbed in the armour of the shems,” protested Revasha. The other hunters looked at each other and nodded. It seemed she was their leader. Leader in the making at the very least. No good. Too hot-headed. “How do we know he’s who he says he is? He could be Harellan^[3].”

Ouch.

“You’re right to be wary,” said Lavellan. “But sincerely, we’re here to help. If you’d rather make your way across the Plains by yourself, that’s alright. It should be relatively safer now.”

“It will never be safe so long as the shemlens are here,” said Revasha.

“She has a point,” said Dorian. “The Orlesian forces are behaving but it could be dangerous if they see a Dalish band travelling along.”

“Would you like us to provide an escort for you, then?” asked Lavellan. “Otherwise, we could point you to a safe passage.”

Olafin shook his head. “Ah, no, that won’t be necessary, thank you. We have already plotted our course and if what you say is true, then it should be safer for travel.” He paused. “But perhaps you could aid our Keeper and a few of ours with him. Our aravel sail has torn and one of our halla was injured. The aravel is filled with our crafting supplies. Without it, I fear the clan will suffer.”

“What are you doing?” hissed Revasha. “You’re leading them right to the Keeper!”

“Keeper Hawen can look after himself.” Olafin frowned at her. “Watch your tone, Revasha.”

At least she bowed her head. “Ir abelas, hahren.”

“A thousand apologies for this young one,” said Olafin.

“No harm, I understand her reservations,” said Lavellan and nodded. “I’ll offer help, but if the Keeper spurns it, there’s not much we can do.”

“That’s all I ask for, da’len. Now then, we must be going.”

“Dareth shiral,” said Lavellan.

Olafin gave him directions to the Keeper Hawen before his band went ahead, Revasha shooting them a venomous glare over her shoulder along the way. They disappeared past the trees.

Lavellan threw his head back and finally allowed himself a sigh.

Dorian chuckled. “Are all Dalish youths that spirited?”

“No, but there’s always one.” He recalled Aenoreir and a smile tugged at his lips. “Though they’re so much more tolerable when you’re at least around the same age.”

“I expect suspicious is the more apt descriptor,” said Solas. “She was the perfect epitome of Dalish paranoia.”

“Remember that talk we had about not being an ass?” Lavellan asked. “This is not a very good start.”

Solas at least had the good grace to look chastened.

They reached the small stream and Lavellan stopped by the banks of it, stared at the fragments of Clan Venalin on the other side, a sharp shuddering breath stuttering into his lungs. It was such a simple sight. They were just aravel sails. And yet, the homesickness plucked at him.

“You alright, Mercy?” asked Bull.

He snapped out of it. “Yeah, just... Just a bit homesick. Bet you’re all feeling pretty homesick too, huh?”

“Quite,” Dorian sighed.

“Home’s with my boys. I’m good for now,” said Bull with a fond smile.

Solas stayed quiet, a faraway look in his eyes. Lavellan already knew he was reassembling his precious, broken empire in his mind’s eye as his gaze raked across the Plains. Lavellan tried not to let that sadden him.

Lavellan wasn’t sure which part of that saddened him. The lost empire or the lost elf?

He crossed the stream using the outcrop of rocks. The Dalish group sequestered here was a small unit with one large aravel and four smaller ones. He spotted the torn sail, and the injured halla being tended to by the Halla Keeper. He gestured for his party to hang back and slowly approached, didn’t want a repeat like with Revasha.

The Dalish glanced up at him, frowned in apprehension, but relaxed somewhat when they saw his vallaslin. Lavellan noted one of them was pregnant and his worry increased exponentially.

An elderly man stepped forward. Keeper Hawen.

Lavellan bowed his head in deference.

“Andaran atish’an, da’len,” greeted Keeper Hawen, keen eyes scanning Lavellan.

“Hahren,” he returned. “Forgive the intrusion. I met your hunters in the forests and helped them fight off demons. Olafin requested that I offer you our assistance.”

“Will you introduce yourself, da’len?”

“I am Mahanon of Clan Lavellan, though I am far from them right now.”

“Lavellan,” said Keeper Hawen. Again, a name easily recognised. “Your Keeper is still Istimaethoriel?”

“Yes.”

“How is she?”

Lavellan smiled. “Last I saw, still terrifying the young ones.”

“Why are you not with them?”

“They sent me to spy on the Conclave that the humans were arranging. I assume you heard the rest.”

His eyes widened. “So it is true. *You* are the one they hail as the prophet of their god.”

“Not through any choice of mine,” said Lavellan.

“Yet we would not have even known you were Dalish if not for your vallaslin.” His eyes saddened. “Are we still your people, da’len?”

Lavellan sucked in a breath, swallowed the sting. “Of course,” he said, did his best to keep his voice from trembling. He understood why Keeper Hawen would ask that, knew he’d react similarly in the same position, but it didn’t lessen the sudden alienation. Different from the humans because he was an elf, different from the Dalish because he acted too human. “But I know you respect deeds over words. What can we do for Clan Venalin then? As a show of good faith?”

He eyed Lavellan’s companions. “We?” he asked.

“They are members of the Inquisition,” said Lavellan. “They will help if I ask.”

Keeper Hawen thought on this, then sighed. “Very well. I see you are sincere. We lost a few of our own from aggressive shemlens and we wished to lay them to rest at Var Bellanaris, but it has been infested with demons.”

Lavellan nodded. “We’ll clear them out.”

“If you wish, you may speak with the Craftmaster and Halla Keeper and ask if they require any assistance.” He glanced at Lavellan’s companions. “Could you introduce us?”

Lavellan gestured them forward to introduce them and Keeper Hawen gave them a polite smile. After the introductions and offer of assistance to the Craftmaster and Halla Keeper, they set to work. Lavellan rubbed his thumb over the surface of his ironbark bow as they walked to Var Bellanaris.

“Everything alright, Mercy?”

“I’m worried, is all.”

Solas frowned at him. “If I may hazard a guess, you were met with hesitation and distrust.”

“Have you turned your hawk-eyed gaze towards me?” mocked Lavellan, an echo of his sentiments the other week. “Staring deep into my soul?”

“You are only confirming my suspicions.”

“If you’re going to be a smug bastard about it, now is *not* the time.”

His mouth pulled. “You seem to always expect the worst of me.”

“It saves time.”

“Wow, look at that!” interrupted Dorian with forced exuberance. “Quite the lovely river in the distance!”

Bull covered his face. “You,” he muttered, “have *no* finesse.”

Chapter End Notes

I always headcanon that the Dalish clan we meet in the Exalted Plains is only a fragment and that the rest are off somewhere else. Also went and gave them a name because we'll be dealing with the rest of them later and it'd be awkward just referring to them as "Keeper Hawen's clan" or something.

Also, I double-checked the size of the red-crested ravens in the game and Maker, they're massive. They're almost the size of Lavellan's TORSO what the fuck, they come up to his KNEES. I'm not sure if that's just scaling gone weird or if they're really that big but damn.

I've written a few side pieces for this fic, most of them in Solas' POV, and I'll be posting them here if I think they're halfway decent -> [A tapestry of stars](#)

Translation

[1] **On dhea'him:** Good afternoon. [\[1\]](#)

[2] **Ma serannas:** Thank you. [\[1\]](#)

[3] **Harellan:** Traitor to one's kin. The Dalish use this to call someone who deserted or was excommunicated from their clan for whatever reason. [\[1\]](#)

Auroras in our moonlit chase

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

watch for his teeth, little sun—

Lavellan and his group headed for Var Bellanaris and cleared it of the demons. Minor ones for them, but no doubt formidable for Keeper Hawen and his small group alone. Lavellan wanted them mobilised as soon as possible. They were out in the open and some part of him itched at that, disliked the vulnerability of it, too used to being safe under the cover of trees.

Before they left, he stopped and bowed his head, stood in silence for a moment to honour those who'd passed. Elvhen and Dalish alike.

"There," said Lavellan. "They should be able to bury their dead again."

"Should we go in?" asked Dorian. "There may still be demons inside."

"No, that would desecrate the place. Besides, nobody enters anymore. The key's been lost so even if there were demons inside, it's unlikely they'll hurt anyone."

They left and searched for Hanal'ghilan, found her by the riverbank, glimmering against the stark setting of the Plains with her sunlit coat and burnished horns. She looked up, dark eyes intelligent and aware. Lavellan set his weapons down.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Someone please pick those up for me."

He approached the halla with care, crouched low, hands held out to show they were empty and to eliminate how much of a threat he seemed. She backed away. He stopped his approach, briefly cast his gaze down as a sign of respect.

"Hanal'ghilan," he greeted. "They call me Mahanon. There is a clan nearby. Clan Venalin. You will be safe there."

She stared at him.

Lavellan looked skywards, called for Vergala in his mind, and she came swooping down, resting on his shoulders. The halla started and took a few more steps back.

"It's alright," he reassured. "Vergala, a little help here?" All he knew about calming wild halla were from what he'd learned from their Halla Keeper.

"Speak to them calmly and articulately. They understand more than you know. Be polite, respectful. They are not pets, Mahanon, they are companions."

She cawed at the halla. Hanal'ghilan tilted her head, took a tentative step forward, and another, and Lavellan beamed. He held his hand out. She pressed her head to it and he bowed his head again, eyes widening when she pushed further and pressed her head against his forehead. Lavellan used to do this with his halla before hunts. She was stubborn and playful, but she'd always carried him fast and true. He missed her.

Hanal'ghilan nudged at him, as if in sympathy, and once again, homesickness pressed at him.

Horses were good too, but he could never make the same connection with them, could never coordinate with them as well as he could with his halla.

“[Ane’th^{\[1\]}](#),” he told her and gently held her head. “But not here.”

She closed her eyes and drew herself up to her full height, didn’t run even as Lavellan rested his hand on her back. They led her back to Clan Venalin while Vergala rested on his shoulders. What a picture the three of them must make. When he returned, Ithiren thanked him profusely and Hanal’ghilan joined the other halla without fuss.

Ithiren eyed Vergala. “You have a friend,” he noted. “A few hunters often use hawks to aid in hunting, or other birds of prey, but red-crests are a strange choice. They are far more interested in playing.”

“Oh, no, I haven’t had her for long. I rescued her when she broke her wing and I let her go after she healed, but she chose to stay.” Though he suspected he had a deeper connection with her. Vergala butted her head against his cheek affectionately.

Ithiren smiled, regarding his vallaslin. “Perhaps it’s Dirthamen’s way of saying he is watching over you, keeping you safe.”

Lavellan hesitated. He forced himself to smile back and say, “Maybe so.”

While he waited for his group to catch up, he glanced at Vergala and she blinked back, clicked her beak at him.

“Did Dirthamen send you?” he teased. She squawked at him, feathers ruffling in affront, and she pecked the top of his head. “Ow! Okay, stop— Ow.”

Solas passed him his weapons when they caught up, provided zero help whatsoever in fending off Vergala’s attack.

“What have you done now?” Solas asked, amused.

“Nothing! I take it back! I take it back!”

Vergala settled, preened herself as if she didn’t just try to riddle the top of his skull with holes. Lavellan scowled and put his weapons back.

“I’ll roast you,” he threatened.

“Lavellan slow,” she taunted.

He grabbed her. Attempted to. She flew off and cawed in mockery before he could. Lavellan huffed.

Solas smiled. “In any case, well done with Hanal’ghilan.” He appraised Lavellan. “You seemed... wistful when you led her back.”

Lavellan shook his head, cast Ithiren’s comment aside. “It just made me miss my halla.”

“Is Clan Lavellan in the practice of riding them?”

“Depends on how many halla we have. During hunts, we ask a few of the halla if we could ride them. Sometimes a hunter bonds with one and it might start refusing to pull the aravels.” He

laughed. "That was the case with mine. It always takes some coaxing to ask her and even then, she only pulls my family's aravel. She was difficult sometimes but I always loved hunting with her. You should have seen how fast she was."

"What was her name?" asked Solas.

"Don't laugh."

"Go on."

Lavellan hesitated, made a face. "Halhal."

Solas kept a straight face but the corner of his lips twitched.

"I said don't laugh."

"I was not."

Lavellan looked at him, unconvinced, and returned to Keeper Hawen.

"Var Bellanaris is cleared, hahren," he reported. Keeper Hawen smiled and nodded his gratitude.

They stayed until late afternoon and assisted them with other matters. Bull helped cart off the dead to Var Bellanaris, Lavellan taught Dorian how to mend the aravel sail once Anaria, who was close to nine months pregnant, complained of backaches, and Solas tended to the injured halla while holding a discussion with Keeper Hawen. Lavellan kept an eye on that conversation. Both seemed tense. Regardless, they pressed on, and the tension dissipated the more they spoke.

When dusk approached, Lavellan promised to return the next day to continue helping them and they followed the river back to camp.

"You spoke with Keeper Hawen for a while," Lavellan said on the way back, wary.

Solas hummed. "Yes. I had mentioned I was a Dreamer. He inquired if I'd encountered any memories of the Elvhen that they did not know of."

"And?" Lavellan asked.

"I... spoke of the Elvhen settlement which once stood here."

"Good talk?"

"Somewhat, I suppose," said Solas, sullen. Lavellan pursed his lips, waited for him to make a comment about the Dalish that was certain to set them off again, but it never came.

They neared camp, but the sound of bickering reached his ears and he shared a concerned look with his companions.

It was Sera and Vivienne.

Varric was staying well out of line of fire while Blackwall was huddled with him, glancing between Sera and Vivienne. Cassandra was nursing a headache. Cole was by the river edge, away from the fighting.

"What's going on?" Lavellan asked.

Sera looked up with a huff and Vivienne narrowed her eyes at her.

“This fool lost us our meal rations with her short-sightedness and ill temper,” she said.

“Oh yeah, friggin’ shove the blame at my feet, all prim and proper you are,” Sera hissed, pointed an accusing finger at her.

“What do you mean we lost our meal rations?” he asked. “Start from the beginning.”

“We were transferring supplies when a pack of wolves accosted our carts,” said Vivienne. “My casting missed because unlike you, Inquisitor, she has no regard for her surroundings when she abuses her elemental flasks. I almost suffered a burn.”

“Oh come off it, you meant to hit me!”

“Dear, I may adore your sound contributions so much so that I would love to see you thrown into the river, but I have enough self-restraint and control to refrain from injuring our own.”

Lavellan massaged his temples. “And the lost rations?”

“Her stupid magic made me drop my stupid bow and some stupid wolf was gonna nom on her poncey arse. Couldn’t shoot it. So I threw meat at it. Say thank you, Vivvy.”

“I will not thank you for a poor tactical choice. Nor will I entertain what thoughts you have about my inclination for sabotage.”

“So we have no food,” said Lavellan.

“Pretty much,” said Varric. “No game for miles either. War’s chased them away. If not that, then the wolves got to them.”

Lavellan glanced at the river. “Have you checked if there’s fish?”

“There is,” said Cole, materialising by the campfire. Blackwall jumped and Sera shrieked. Vivienne pulled her lips in annoyance at the sound.

“There we go.” Lavellan dug around one of the carts they’d managed to bring over and took out the fishing spears and weighted net. “Set up the fire. I’ll see if I can catch us some fish.”

“I quite enjoyed learning how to mend your sails earlier,” said Dorian. “Do you mind if I ask for fishing lessons?”

“Not at all. But we have to do it quick before the light fades. Any experience?” They walked towards the riverbank.

“With a line. Although, I was twelve when I last went fishing.”

Dorian was a quick study. After missing for a solid half-hour, he speared his first fish and crowed when he held it up and placed it in the basket. He promptly slipped and fell into the water. Lavellan leaned on the spear and grinned down at him and his wet hair plastered to his forehead. Iron Bull’s laughter echoed from camp.

“I just chased away the fish, didn’t I?” Dorian asked with a small sigh.

“Sort of. But it’s alright.” Lavellan helped him up. “I think we’ll have enough for everyone tonight.”

“You caught five in the time it took me to catch one.”

“You caught one within thirty minutes of learning. I’d say that’s decent. I’ve just been doing this for a while, is all. One of my hunters, Iranae? She’s damn good at spearfishing. She’s just good with a spear in general.”

Dorian smiled. “You really miss them, don’t you?”

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder, as they say,” said Lavellan. “Things were simpler then.”

“It must have been quite the leap. From providing food to... well, *this*.”

Lavellan shrugged. He’d been doing *this* for six years. That was longer than the time he’d spent as a Warleader. It was sad that he was more accustomed to leading an army than leading a hunting party, but still, providing food for his companions while they were out during their campaigns helped simulate home. A normal activity amidst the strange things happening to him.

“It’s not so bad,” said Lavellan, shot Dorian a cheeky grin. “Sometimes, I get to watch my friends slip and fall in rivers after catching fish.”

“Terrible, you.”

“Come on, I’ll show you how to gut them without making a giant mess.”

They sat by the banks and Lavellan talked him through the process, laughed at Dorian’s disgusted face, and for a moment, he could pretend they were as close as they had been in his past life. They were getting there, but it still wasn’t the same. Sometimes Lavellan just wanted to *look* at him and have him immediately realise what was wrong. He’d always known how to cheer Lavellan up.

After they cleaned the fish and wrapped them, ready to take back to camp, Dorian regarded Lavellan as they washed the smell off their hands.

“So, what’s wrong?” he asked.

Lavellan blinked. “What?”

“This strange hostility between you and Solas. It isn’t from anger, that I’m certain.”

“Oh, you’re certain, are you?” So this was the true objective of the fishing lessons.

“I’m not presuming to know you, but I know a hurt look hiding behind anger when I see it. It’s on *both* your faces, although it was a little harder to tell with Solas. Difficult fellow to read.” He dried his hands and closed the fish basket, patted the lid. “You’re under no obligation to tell me, of course! Merely worried, is all.”

Lavellan wrung excess water from his shirt. “I’m sorry, it’s poor manners to argue in front of everyone and it makes you all uncomfortable. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure this doesn’t affect our missions.”

“Inquisitor, I was talking about *you*. I’m worried about you. Disagreements within a group of people? Quite inevitable. But whatever disagreement you have with Solas is clearly far more personal.” He laid a gentle hand on Lavellan’s arm. “I may be hopeless at fishing, but I wouldn’t extend the same courtesy to being blind to when my dear friends are upset.”

“I’m a dear friend?” teased Lavellan.

“Obviously,” said Dorian as if he were announcing that Orlais was an empire. His expression softened. “But I meant it. I’m listening, if you’d like to tell me about it.”

Lavellan stared at the river, then recognised the large wolf statue atop the tall hill across the river, overlooking most of the Plains. He recalled attempting to reach it in his past life, had explored and climbed and searched for hidden passages to no avail.

Solas smiled up at him. “Come down before you hurt yourself.”

“I will climb that giant wolf statue or so help me gods!” Lavellan declared, clambering over the stones.

“Is there a reason for this sudden obsession?”

“You don’t need a reason to want to climb a tall thing.”

“Ah. The pursuit of the unattainable.”

Lavellan looked down at him, unamused. “It’s not unattainable.”

“No?” He tilted his head, smiling. “You are free to climb me. I am much more attainable, and within easy reach.”

The asshole had known *exactly* what he was talking about. Still, he smiled faintly at the memory, glancing back at camp where Solas was conversing with Cassandra. Lavellan averted his gaze just as Solas looked up.

His smile faded.

Dorian stared at him.

“You love him, don’t you?”

Lavellan scowled. “I beg your pardon?”

“Maker, you two are even starting to sound like each other.”

“I didn’t realise ‘I beg your pardon’ was limited to Solas.”

“Not the words themselves, you see. Rather, how you say them.” He grinned. “And when did I mention Solas?”

Lavellan paused, then looked away pointedly. Dorian placed the fish baskets aside and sat by the banks, patted the spot beside him. Lavellan contemplated leaving.

He sat instead, pulled his legs to his chest and rested his chin on his knees.

“Does he make you happy?” Dorian asked.

Happy?

Of course he did. For a while. He’d been the shelter in the storm, a safe space, a quiet space — gentle amidst the screaming world. Then it turned out that he was the one who’d caused the screaming in the first place. Solas had ripped apart the shelter with an undoing violence and a grieving apology.

Lavellan didn't want his fucking apology. He wanted his head on a pike, his heart crushed in Lavellan's hands.

No, you don't.

"It's complicated," Lavellan finally answered. How sorely he wished to divulge everything so somebody could tell him what to do for once.

Sadness lingered in Dorian's eyes and Lavellan almost snapped at him to get that look off his face, but he knew it wasn't Dorian he was angry at, not really. Who at? At the world? At the hand it had dealt him? Why did Solas have to be Fen'Harel and why did Lavellan have to be the Inquisitor? Couldn't they have just stayed as Solas and Lavellan? Just them. So they could love in the middle of the chaos, care in the spaces of the flames.

"You're not planning to do anything about it, are you?" asked Dorian.

Lavellan clenched his hands, wrinkled the material of his pants. "No."

"But do you wish to? If Solas reciprocated, would you still reject him?"

"That would be wise."

"That's not an answer."

It would be wise. Justified, even.

He panted, blood-soaked. The sounds of the fighting dulled in his ears and he moved, cut, tore, killed. He cut one down. Two. Ten. Twenty. Fifty. Sea of dead bodies felled by his wrath. He bared his teeth, gnashed, but he kept his eyes trained on the figure in the distance. Anybody who stood in his way was dead. Flesh, blood, broken bone. A hurricane of slaughter.

Solas wished to walk the path of death? Very well. Lavellan would cleave for him the path. The destination: them both.

Painstaking, he reached him.

"Hello, lover."

Solas turned, eyes weary, armour dirtied and bloodied.

"I come bearing gifts," he continued and Solas' eyes fell on the blighted blade in his hand. "I promise to aim for the heart."

"Will you slip past the ribs?" he asked, voice as heavy and dark as the rest of him.

"I will break through them."

"You cannot stand against me."

"You're right. But I don't plan to just stand."

Lavellan rushed forward.

He summoned his anger, his rage, remembered their final moments, the absolute wrath that had flooded his chest, called upon it so he could answer, "I'll say no," but the words wouldn't come. They shrivelled in his throat. No, they didn't even make it past his throat. They tangled in his chest

and festered there.

They danced beneath the stars, laughing and spinning and kissing. Tender caress, rough gasps. Burst at the seams, full of him and warm from him, around and beyond. Was this peace amidst war?

“Ar lath, ma vhenan.”

Morning woke them and Solas’ chest rose and fell like gentle waves upon a soft shore, heart a steady beat beneath him. Lavellan nestled into his warmth, traced the lines of his lips with his own.

His anger never answered. It fizzled. Gone and burnt.

He hung his head, defeated.

Dorian shuffled closer and gently bumped Lavellan’s shoulder with his.

“*Aurum* for your thoughts?” asked Dorian. “Or sovereigns. Whichever you’re more inclined to use.”

“Wouldn’t it be *aes* for your thoughts?”

“Your thoughts are worth more than bronze, dear Inquisitor.”

He snorted. “You don’t want my thoughts, Dorian, believe me.” Too many screams and indiscernible whispers.

“I disagree,” he said, affable as always. “You have lovely thoughts. Like little bells. Sometimes, the bells are scary but what’s life without a smidgen of unease?”

Lavellan smiled, traced patterns into the soil with his finger.

“What do you want?” Dorian asked.

Truth. Answers. Honesty. Luxuries neither he nor Solas could indulge in.

“What I want doesn’t matter,” said Lavellan. “I can’t have them. That’s not how this works.”

Dorian arched a brow. “Pray tell, how does this work then?”

“I do what I can, I help who I can, make sure they’ll be alright for the future, and then I die,” said Lavellan.

“Vishante kaffas,” breathed Dorian, and in hindsight, Lavellan should have softened the blow a little. “You *are* allowed to think of yourself. You don’t have to live as if...” His expression turned concerned. “You don’t have to live as if you’re preparing to die.”

Lavellan smiled sadly. *Oh Dorian*, he wished to say, *I’m already dead*.

Dorian gripped Lavellan’s shoulders, gaze fierce. “What you want matters. Of course it matters! You don’t have to give all of yourself up just to help others.”

“They’ll take it anyway,” he said, still smiling. “I’ve come to terms with that a long time ago. They’ll take even what I’m not ready to give. Par for the course of this whole hero gig.”

“It doesn’t—!” Dorian let go before he could sever Lavellan’s tendon from how hard he was

gripping his shoulder. He shook his head. "It doesn't have to be like that. You deserve better than that."

"Maybe." Lavellan shrugged, resigned. "But it's not what I'm getting."

"No," rejected Dorian with an air of finality.

Lavellan blinked at him. "No?"

"No." He pointed his finger at him. "You, good sir, will not waste away from the greedy hands of the masses. I will not allow it."

"I happen to care for those masses."

"You can't care for the bloody masses when you're dead in a ditch. You don't have to lose parts of yourself just to provide for them." He grabbed Lavellan's shoulder again. "What you want matters. *You* matter. As a person. More than Inquisitor or a blasted prophet of an absent god. Your needs and feelings and wants and whims have priority and *you* take priority. Must I start shaking you to convey the sentiment? Because I'll do it. I'll shake you."

Lavellan could only stare at him with a dumbfounded look, taken aback by the vehemence of said sentiment.

"Say it with me. 'I am important.' Go on."

"I don't—"

"Say it. I'm not letting you go until you do."

He sighed and went with it. "I am important."

"Again."

Lavellan scowled. "I already said it."

"Well then, it shouldn't be a dreadful struggle to repeat it!" Dorian shot him an infuriating smile. "Once more, from the top, with feeling."

"I'll shave your moustache in your sleep."

"Not quite the words I'm looking for."

Lavellan glanced back at the river. The sky had dimmed, not quite a beautiful sunset because of the orange haze still covering the sky.

"I am important," he murmured.

"I know it's hard to believe at the moment," said Dorian, "but keep saying it. Keep reminding yourself. You hold merit on your own. You are important as you are, whoever you choose to be. I mean that in terms of identity, by the way. Reprehensible megalomaniac is *not* an identity trait, no matter what Corypheus says."

He snorted. "I'm sure he'll be devastated to hear that."

Dorian pulled him into a firm hug. The position was somewhat awkward with his body twisted to the side and the slight ache in his hip from his leg being pulled but it... It was nice. Unexpected,

but nice. Lavellan hadn't realised how touch-starved he'd been. He clung onto Dorian without meaning to.

"You are important, Mahanon," said Dorian, and maybe it was the usage of his name which did the trick, but the words finally hit him and pressure built behind his eyes. "To me, to Solas, to every single one of your lost, little ducklings in Skyhold."

Dorian pulled back and Lavellan kept his gaze down, the space between his brows aching from holding back the tears.

"Please," Dorian whispered. "Don't live to die. Don't die for us, for them." Lavellan looked up, vision blurry, but he could still discern Dorian's patient smile. "Live for us. With us. Yes? More preferable, no?"

"I don't want to hope," said Lavellan through the thickness of his throat. "It always gets taken from me."

"If there's anything I've learned while traipsing along with you and the causes you champion, it's that hope can't be taken. Not truly. It's like a weed. It keeps coming back." He patted Lavellan's knee and Lavellan wiped the tears before they could fall. "And most times, the hope you've inspired is a hope that people have fought for. They fought to get it. They fight to keep it."

"I'm tired of fighting," he muttered morosely, then grimaced. "I'm sorry, I'm totally shitting on your parade here. You're trying to encourage me and I'm—"

"Stop," said Dorian. "This isn't about me. You are perfectly entitled to feel exhausted." He slung his arm around Lavellan, and they stayed in the quiet for a moment. Lavellan missed Dorian. So, so terribly. It wasn't the same.

That wasn't so bad, was it?

Gods, I miss them, he thought wretchedly. He missed them all, his friends in the future. Past. Whatever.

"But would you care to try?" asked Dorian. "Again? I know it's dreary, but would you care for it again?"

Would he? Fight for hope and fight to keep it? Could he weather through that ordeal again?

Hadn't he asked Solas to try again, too? Lavellan laughed without humour and covered his eyes with his hand.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Ah, that's not a no! We can certainly work with that."

Lavellan smiled. "Have you always been such an optimist?"

"I can't help it, it seems. Foolish of me, maybe."

"No," he murmured, turned nasally by his clogged nose. "It takes strength to keep going."

Dorian looked at Lavellan as if he'd missed something and had failed to realise it.

Lavellan frowned. "What?"

"Baby steps," he sighed. "I hope you find peace with whatever has you conflicted, and I hope you consider your personal happiness when you make your choice."

"You know if it came down to my personal happiness or duty, I'll always choose duty."

Lavellan paused. Wasn't that how Solas had made his choice too? The world had become real, and yet he'd still pursued whatever duty he believed he had to the People at the cost of everyone and himself. So were Lavellan's efforts for naught after all? Would it matter if they become real to Solas? What if Solas still pushed on despite the great regret in his heart? Would it be the two of them facing off again as the sky fell and the earth burned? Would Lavellan still be the fool cradling his shattered, battered heart at the end of it again?

Spirit of Change. He had to scoff. What could he do? He was powerless.

"I know," said Dorian. "And there's no easy answer to it. But all I ask is that you consider yourself too."

Lavellan closed his eyes. Truly an unlearning fool. Even as the futility of the situation bared its teeth, he still wanted to try. Because he had nothing else otherwise. That thought terrified him more.

"We'll see," Lavellan answered and eyed the darkening sky. "We'll see."

They remained there for another few moments in a meaningful silence, at least until Lavellan was sure all signs of his almost-cry were gone. Dorian helped him stand and they carried the fish baskets back to camp.

"Thanks," said Lavellan on the way.

"Anytime. I meant everything I said. You're important too. I hope one day you see it. In the meantime, we'll keep shouting it for you until it finally sinks in your thick head."

They reached camp and Dorian cheerily announced their attainment of food, projecting a radiant disposition to take the attention off Lavellan, which he was grateful for. Cole saw through it, as usual. Lavellan ignored his stare and worked on roasting the fish, made sure everyone had food and stayed quiet as he ate, listened to snippets of conversation around him. Cole was still staring. Solas shot him looks as well. Lavellan *should* engage someone in conversation, appear as if he was fine, but he couldn't find the energy to fake it.

Once everyone was sated and conversations had hushed somewhat, Cole tilted his head at Lavellan, hat on his lap.

"He's right," said Cole and caught everyone's attention. "You *are* important."

That silenced the whole camp. Lavellan cleared his throat and gave them a tired smile.

"I'm going to go tuck in early."

"Already?" asked Blackwall. "Sun just set a while ago."

"I'm really beat," was his excuse, flimsy as it was.

Solas frowned. "You barely ate," he said but Lavellan was already halfway through the tent flap.

"I wasn't that hungry."

The flap closed. He peeled off most of his clothes, which had dried from the fire, and crawled into his bedroll. He pulled the blanket over his head and curled up beneath it, wallowing in the dark and the soft conversations outside which he knew were about him. At some point, the conversations faded. The fire outside darkened. People said their goodnights and retreated into their tents, but Lavellan was still wide awake. At that point, he tuned into the whispers of the Well. It truly was a sad day when he preferred their ominous whispers over the company of his own thoughts.

Dorian meant well, he knew, but there were too many lies between him and Solas. They couldn't entangle themselves romantically. It would burn them both, just as it had last time, and the only way for it to work this time was if they dismantled all the lies and brought themselves bare.

And what were the chances of that happening?

He didn't know. Maybe he never would. Maybe they would dance to the gallows, dangling from the rope of their dishonesty, seizing from the force of their heartache.

Lavellan wasn't sure when, but he eventually answered the call of sleep.

He awoke to the stars above him.

Lavellan sighed. Here it was again. Vergala cawed and he was already up, already sprinting to the forest, tearing through the undergrowth, catching the movement of the black cloak of shifting feathers.

The cloaked figure stayed just within sight. Never too far, but never close.

No faces in the trees tonight. Tonight, it was just them and the bulging moon peering too close, too bright yet too dim. Whenever Lavellan lagged, the figure would stop and wait. They were leading Lavellan. Somewhere. He wasn't sure where, but he knew he must follow.

The night was black.

All the stars turned away.

Lavellan's breaths fogged, accumulating instead of dissipating, becoming a blanket of mist around him with every exhale.

His mind filled with whispers.

[Josa, josa, laim'da'lin! Shem'el! Ne juha'lam'shirem!](#) ^[2]

“*[Es ir shem](#)*”^[3],” he protested.

[Esaya'el](#)”^[4].

Gee, thanks.

[Ma nuvenas sil'ahnen](#)”^[5]?

“*[Vin](#)*”^[6].”

The cloak flashed to his left. Lavellan swerved. The moon hid behind the clouds, veiling the forest with near-darkness. All at once, glyphs on the trees glowed, the same four glyphs scattered about, eerie and green and shining past the fog and inviting him to take a closer look. But no, he stayed focused.

Not that it mattered. He lost sight of the cloaked figure and found himself alone in the forest, breaths too rapid, heart too loud. Mist in his throat.

Lavellan panted, senses alert.

A low growl rumbled around him.

He tensed, scanned his surroundings. The clouds passed the moon and doused the area with light, the mist thickening and clamouring into his throat.

Lavellan turned, suddenly clad in his Dalish hunting gear, ironbark bow in his hand. He retrieved an arrow from his quiver, nocked and waited, vigilant.

A shadow shifted in the fog. Red eyes. Six of them.

Lavellan kept his calm and aimed at the six eyes.

“Fen’Harel,” he greeted. “To what do I owe the pleasure? I was chasing something important and you seem to have scared it away.”

The red eyes faded.

Lavellan aimed at the sky and released the arrow.

And waited.

A cold sensation pressed against his back, but when he turned, there was nothing there.

The fog cleared with an almighty gust of wind and Lavellan turned back around, stared unimpressed at the hulking, lupine beast dripping tar from its fur. It bared its teeth in an impression of a grin. Lavellan cocked his head at him, counted in his mind, waited.

Then, Lavellan said, “I wouldn’t stand there if I were you.”

Fen’Harel’s ears pricked and he leapt aside just as the arrow from earlier buried itself into the ground he’d been standing on, dangerously close to his front paw. He looked at Lavellan with narrowed eyes.

“You dare?” he asked, voice a thundering whisper.

“I do,” said Lavellan. A mirror of Fen’Harel’s actions during the tale of the Slow Arrow. “I can do it again, if you’d like.”

Fen’Harel crushed the arrow beneath his large paw.

Lavellan nocked another arrow and drew, aimed right between his many eyes. “Or I can quit throwing arrows in the sky and get on with it. You did chase away my quarry. I believe you’re also

invading my dreams. What business?"

"An accident," said the Wolf. "We were not meant to meet. I simply wandered too close."

"And why were you wandering so close? Is that an accident as well?"

Fen'Harel paused. "No."

"Again, what business?"

"Your nights have been peaceful lately, have they not? No longer are you plagued by nightmares. Whose doing do you suppose it is?"

Lavellan faltered. "I assumed it was the doing of a friend."

"It is," said the Wolf, tone edging into something playful. "We *are* friends, are we not?"

Lavellan was going to ask Sera to shove lizards in Solas' bedroll tomorrow morning.

"So, what? *You* are chasing my nightmares away?"

Fen'Harel tilted his head, six eyes blinking consecutively. "[Vun'lin^{\[9\]}](#), I *devour* your nightmares." Lavellan paused at the nickname. That was... new.

"Why?" he asked.

"Do you not sadden when the sunlight dims?"

Lavellan relaxed his drawn bow, frowned further.

Fen'Harel looked around. "But this is no nightmare, and I am trespassing. I will promptly take my leave and you may resume your hunt." He shot Lavellan a sly look. "Or perhaps... you could ride me."

"You're calling me slow, aren't you?" he asked, ignoring the double entendre, if it even was one.

His grin widened impossibly. "Nonsense. You are simply... lagging." Ass. "You will never catch your quarry, whatever it may be. Not like that. Do you not ride halla when you hunt faster prey?"

"Those are halla. You are a giant, hulking wolf." Lavellan eyed the dripping tar. "And you're dripping."

"Then you are perfectly free to fall behind. After all, it is not as if your quarry was, what was it you said? Important?" He lowered his head, almost as if he was bowing, but the mischievous gleam in his eyes ruined any show of deference. "Allow me to conciliate for my transgression of ruining your moonlit hunt, Inquisitor Lavellan. I offer you the opportunity to hunt with the Dread Wolf. If you will have me. Provided you refrain from using my stories against me and unleashing arrows from the skies."

Lavellan considered him, looked back out into the forest and pursed his lips. He'd lost sight of the faceless figure.

"A hunt with the Dread Wolf," he mused. "Well there's a story to make the Keeper shriek. So long as I'm hunting *with* you, not hunted *by* you. I will not have you chasing me across the forest like a rabid dog. *You* are the one aiding me, understand?"

“Perfectly,” he said and lowered himself so Lavellan could have easy access to his back. “Shall we?”

He approached, and interestingly, the dripping stopped. When Lavellan touched his fur, it was soft and not slick like it had initially appeared. He swung his legs over Fen’Harel’s back and settled, grabbing onto his fur as he rose.

“You are quite pedantic with your wording,” said Fen’Harel.

“I would insult you if I didn’t at least try.”

“And why is that?”

Lavellan smiled. “Do you want to talk or do you want to hunt?”

Fen’Harel barked out a laugh. Lavellan felt the muscles beneath him shifting, coiling tight. “Very well, vun’lin. Hold on. I will show you what it truly means to hunt.”

“I await with bated breath.”

Fen’Harel bounded across the forest.

Lavellan yelped at the sudden burst of speed and gripped his fur hard, lowered himself so he wouldn’t fall, jarred slightly every time Fen’Harel’s feet hit the ground. The trees blurred as they passed.

Fen’Harel was right. This *was* faster.

Lavellan found himself grinning, the cold winds washing over his face and blowing his hair back, refreshing and clearing his mind.

Elation swelled in his chest, funnelled up his throat and escaped as a carefree laugh. Fen’Harel quickened his pace. The wind howled in Lavellan’s ears and he slowly relaxed, drew himself up straighter, thighs doing most of the work of keeping him in place.

“You’re going too fast!” Lavellan yelled over the whipping winds.

“No such thing!” Just to prove his point, he quickened his pace.

“You mad wolf!”

Fen’Harel laughed and Lavellan joined. They tore through the forest, wind on their faces, mirth in their chests. When Fen’Harel leapt over a bulging root, they stayed suspended in a single, stolen moment. Once Fen’Harel landed beneath the silver lunar light, his fur shifted to pristine white, turned even softer under Lavellan’s hand. His six eyes flooded with sapphire.

Lavellan threw his head back with a wild and breathless cackle. The thrill of the hunt had almost returned. Almost.

“Come, Wolf,” he said. “Let us start this hunt in earnest.”

Fen’Harel swerved at a large tree. Lavellan spied the shifting of a dark cloak.

“There!” he said.

“I see them,” affirmed Fen’Harel.

The cloaked figure led them on a mad chase across the forest and soon, the thrill of the hunt thrummed in his veins, made him itch, eager and hungry. The figure looked over their shoulder. Fen'Harel would catch up soon.

Something told Lavellan he had to shoot. Had to prove his worth.

The figure's cloak wrapped around themselves and warped, spread, became wings, became talons, became a large raven. It cawed a terrible shriek, eyes white and milky, coasting across the trees and beating its mighty wings.

[*Bora mar assan, she! I've es josa*](#)^[10].

Well, it was talky tonight.

He nocked and took aim. A little difficult given Fen'Harel's movements. No matter.

"How is your aim, vun'lin?"

Solas better take care that he doesn't accidentally call Lavellan that in the waking world.

"You'll find out."

He took a deep breath, the thrum in his veins narrowing into lethal focus.

The sounds of the forest quieted, his vision honing in on his target. Lavellan felt for the breeze, discerned its direction, took note of the raven's movements, and adjusted his bow.

A gentle, slow exhale left his lips.

He released the arrow.

It zipped ever forward, unerring in its trajectory, arced over the sky and fell, fell, fell.

Right in the middle of the raven's back.

It squawked, staggering in its flight. His arrow flared like a lance of light and the colours of an aurora rippled across the raven's plumage. The stars hummed in exaltation. Fen'Harel slowed to a stop, gaze skywards as the raven beat its wings.

The raven swooped at them.

Lavellan balked. "Oh, shi—"

It swerved up before it could hit them and cawed.

Come, it seemed to say. Fen'Harel looked back at him in question and Lavellan grinned, wide-eyed and wild, euphoria and exhilaration the likes of which he'd never felt before burning in his blood.

"Are you faster than a raven, Dread Wolf?"

Fen'Harel's eyes lit with delight. He gave no answer in the form of words and instead let his powerful legs carry them through the forest, right beneath the raven. Lavellan's arrow became a ribbon of golden light trailing behind it.

They chased it through the night. Fen'Harel showed no signs of tiring, which suited Lavellan just fine.

The raven led them out of the forest and out onto the open Plains where they ran beside the stream and beneath the stars and their forgotten hymns. Fen'Harel hummed them beneath him. Lavellan found himself humming along even if he'd never heard the melody before.

They followed the stream to a short waterfall. Fen'Harel crouched and leapt to the very top, waded through the water, walked onto dry land. The raven landed by a set of elven doors that had been integrated into the rockface. Its eyes were no longer misty. Now, they were as golden as the deepest pools of sunlight.

Lavellan tapped Fen'Harel's back and he crouched, let Lavellan slide off his back.

The raven was almost as large as the doors. It tilted its head at Lavellan's approach. He held his hand out and the raven crouched to rest its head against it.

Then, it disappeared in a violent gust of wind and feathers.

He stared at the space the raven had used to occupy and frowned. He'd finished the hunt. It was a success.

Lavellan looked at the door that the raven had led them to and rested his hand upon its surface. Two halla above the door framed it. He ran his hands over the pattern etched upon the wood and recognised what the pattern denoted.

"A shrine to Sylaise?" he mumbled to himself. "Why here?"

Lavellan looked back. Fen'Harel was sitting on his haunches, tilting his head, and that briefly reminded Lavellan of the curious wolf he'd carved for him. How accurate.

"Are you seeking something, vun'lin?" asked Fen'Harel.

"Perhaps."

"Ah, I see how it is. I graciously lend you my services and yet you keep secrets from me?"

He smiled. "You did not lend your services. You offered them as conciliation for your transgression. Quite a difference. Second, I never said, and you never asked, that we could share the rewards of the hunt. Perhaps next time you should specify."

His eyes squinted, as if smiling. "Next time?"

Lavellan paused. Next time?

"I can scarce believe your hesitation now, not after you took such joy in hunting with me."

"I—" Lavellan pursed his lips. He wasn't wrong. Never had he felt that alive before. "I enjoyed it, yes."

"Enjoy? Such a tame word. You *revelled*. Euphoric in your thrill." He bared his teeth in a grin and stood slow, languid, yet it filled Lavellan with impending unease. "Such focus and clarity when you took aim. What vivid colours you brought forth with your arrow. I have a better idea for next time."

Fen'Harel's sharp gaze pinned Lavellan.

"Next time, vun'lin—" he took a step forward and Lavellan took one back, heart pounding, mouth drying— "I would like to be the hunter."

"I see," said Lavellan, grip on the bow tightening, anticipating yet dreading with every step that Fen'Harel took.

"Do you know who I would like to chase? Which quarry I wish to flush out of its den?"

Lavellan already knew the answer.

Fen'Harel laughed, dark and sinister and utterly delighted.

"You."

Lavellan awoke with a sharp gasp, limbs trembling. Not from fear. Not from dread or anxiety.

From exhilaration.

"Sweet Sylaise," he muttered beneath his breath, noted that the bedrolls around him were already empty and that there was chatter outside. Lavellan waited until he wasn't shaking before clambering out of the tent. The light was bright and he squinted. The sun was already at a considerable height, even through the orange haze. "Urgh," he grumbled. "Elgar'nan, strike the sun down again."

"Good afternoon, Glow," Varric teased.

"I'll push you into the river," he muttered.

"Aww, it's Inquisi-grump," cooed Sera.

Lavellan rubbed his eyes and let them adjust to the light. He blinked blearily, still half-asleep and wishing he were on the back of a great wolf tearing through the forest at hair-whipping speeds.

"This is a rare occurrence," said Varric as Lavellan all but flopped down on a log, the rest of his companions already gone or busying themselves with gearing up. "You slept for a long time."

"For once, I'm not the last to wake up," said Dorian, already groomed and ready for the day.

"Sleep well, Inquisitor?" came Solas' dulcet voice from behind him.

Lavellan grumbled. "I overslept," he said. "That has never happened before."

"There is a first for everything," said Solas and he walked to the edge of the river with a basin. Lavellan squinted at his retreating back. Next time the Wolf wanted to hunt, Lavellan would shove arrows into all six of his eyes.

"Hey, Sera, want to put lizards in Solas' bedroll?"

Chapter End Notes

Mahanon 'I'll keep all my emotions right here, and then one day I'll die' Lavellan.

Sweetie, no. (Watching John Mulaney clips instead of doing stuff I need to do?
Couldn't be me)

I cry anytime I see Solas content so you can imagine the week I've had what with the DA4 behind-the-scenes stuff getting dropped. Look at Solas in his all-black outfit, little dramatic emo, off to destroy the world. And who is that mysterious Qunari? She can crack my back like a glow stick over her knee and I'd thank her.

In all seriousness, the concept art was breathtaking. Chef's kiss.

(Okay, seriously, [the ravens are massive](#). They're birds-of-prey size. Imagine this asshole just comes walking in with an eagle on his shoulders. I'd be terrified. This eagle-sized bird is black, has a crooked beak and red eyes, and can talk. Fuck spying, Vergala could tear a man's face to shreds. Power to you, baby.)

They're smaller in cutscenes tho. Still, the image of this massive scary bird is too funny.

Translation:

[1] **Ane'th:** (You) are safe^[↑]

[2] **Josa, josa, laim'da'lin! Shem'el! Ne juha'lam'shirem!:** Run run, lost little boy!
Faster! You'll be left behind!^[↑]

[3] **Es ir shem:** They're too quick^[↑]

[4] **Esaya'el:** Try harder^[↑]

[5] **Ma nuvenas sil'ahnen?:** You desire answers?^[↑]

[6] **Vin:** Yes^[↑]

[7] **Rehnan shem'el!:** In that case, faster!^[↑]

[8] **Inana'misu!:** Watch out (lit. watch the knife)^[↑]

[9] **Vun'lin:** Little sun (more of a diminutive nickname over literally little. Basically he's calling Lavellan sunling)^[↑]

[10] **Bora mar assan, she! I've es josa:** Shoot your arrow, quickly! Before they flee!^[↑]

Into the heart of shadows

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mild NSFW content ahead (Not who you think). Dubious consent. I've put in a skip button before the content if you'd like to avoid it in case.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

peer behind the curtains—

He encountered the first glyph through tragedy.

Lavellan delivered the news to the Dalish about the death of their Second, Valorin, and softened the blow by omitting Valorin's attempts to use blood magic in order to find Lindiranae's talisman and impress the Keeper. All so he could earn the title of First. Lavellan sighed. Foolish teenagers. The least Lavellan could do was find the talisman and give it to the Dalish for some peace of mind.

That was how they ended up in front of a familiar set of doors. The shrine to Sylaise. Ascending the waterfall leading to it had been more difficult without Fen'Harel to cover the distance for him. There was also a wolf statue at the top of the waterfall. It hadn't been there in the dream.

Lavellan stared at the door.

"Are we going in?" asked Bull.

"Wind whipping and wild," said Cole. "My blood sings. Would he dance if I asked him to? Shifting, shimmering, sharing the stars and the songs under the sky. Glowing beneath the moonlight. I lose my breath. I'm more alive than I've ever been."

Solas stayed quiet. Lavellan smiled at the memory, allowed himself a droplet of fondness.

"What's he talking about?" Bull grumbled.

"The hunt," said Lavellan.

"You know, Mercy, sometimes you're worse than him."

"He can be," agreed Cole. "But he won't." Cole paused. "Wait. Might. No, won't."

Bull made a displeased noise.

"Boo," Lavellan teased. He opened the door with the key he'd found on Valorin's body and expected the door to creak, perhaps drag on the floor after centuries of disuse, expected dust. But the door swung with neither hitch nor sound and no motes of dust danced in the light. Magic was still protecting this place.

They clambered down the stairs littered with fallen bricks. The moment Lavellan stepped foot within the dark chamber, a clear ring tolled in his head. A small, meek bell.

Solas lit the Veilfire and green light flooded the large space. Empty. It may have been a shrine to Sylaise at one point but now, there was nothing left. A magical barrier was blocking off a section of the wall and he nodded for Solas to take it down.

Lavellan's face fell at what lay beyond.

A corpse. Mummified, somehow, despite not being wrapped. Pointed ears, lithe build, faded and tattered elven robes.

“They marched, silver and spectral but solid,” said Cole. “They call me wild, fearless, savage. So I will be wild, fearless, savage. They cheered as she fell, words dripping from her lips. Whispered until she died.” He looked down. “I will not submit.”

Never again shall we submit.

“Lindiranae,” Lavellan murmured, fists clenching. The Dales had fallen with her death. “Did they just shove her in here? To be forgotten?” He knelt beside the corpse and he pursed his lips. They hadn't even granted her the courtesy of a burial.

“Bull, Solas,” he said, “go back to the Dalish camp and get another casket.” He looked behind him at this silent, empty, deadened room. “I want to bring her to Var Bellanaris and lay her to rest. She deserves better.”

Bull nodded, murmured his assent. Solas laid a reassuring hand on Lavellan's shoulder and squeezed. Lavellan wasn't thinking when he reached for his hand and squeezed back. Warm. He removed his hand before he could spook Solas. Or himself.

“Go on,” Lavellan whispered. “I'll be fine.”

Solas withdrew his hand and walked away, but he stopped at the door and stared at him with an unreadable expression on his face. Lavellan was about to ask, but Solas left before he could.

“His people suffered because of me. He suffers because of me,” said Cole.

To that, Lavellan had no response. He stood and the small bell rang again.

“Remnants of the Elvhen. Is this what she meant?” he asked and followed the ringing. He stopped in front of the opposite wall, something faint and shimmering on its surface, magic ghosting over his skin. A glyph. He grabbed the Veilfire off its bracket and brought it closer.

The glyph lit. Lavellan's breath left him. This was one of the glyphs that had been branded on the trees in his dream.

It reached for him, imparted a secret lesson—

“Let me borrow him.” Her eyes are red. She is red. When she smiles, it slips like poisoned wine. She cups my cheeks, sharp nails ghosting over my skin. “Just for one night.”

He frowns at her, violet eyes shimmering with disdain. “No. He is not for sharing.”

“Come now, brother. I merely wish to teach him.”

“In your bedroom, I presume? No. Find another to lay with.”

"You accuse me of the crudest things." She grins, teeth flashing, fit for tearing skin. "I would like to teach him how to hunt. He has been doing splendidly since he has trained and matured, but if he is serious about serving as your hidden arm, he must learn to fly like the knife he could be. Sharp, focused." She looks back at me and tips my chin up, gaze tracing the lines of devotion marked on my face. "A valuable lesson, no?"

I glance at him in question. He remains apprehensive.

"If it will help him," I say.

Her grin widens and she laughs, carefree and wild. Red. She is Freedom. Not liberty. Simple, untainted freedom.

"You. I will enjoy you."

Her spoils decorate her quarters, but her bedroom remains untouched, a private sanctuary. The door clicks behind her, shimmering with magic.

"You said you would teach me to hunt," I say.

"I will." She slips behind me, fingers curling on my waist as she turns and pushes me down onto her bed. "I will show you another hunt. Just as pleasurable." Sharp nails trail up my chest, red eyes flashing as she hovers over me. "Have you lain with anyone before?"

I frown, uncertain of the word and its implications.

She laughs in her delight. "Never... explored?" Her hands trail south and grasps. I jolt at the unknown sensation. A fire is roaring in her great hearth, heating the room, but I suspect that is not why I feel warm. "No matter. It would hardly be teaching if you already knew."

"He doesn't want me here," I say.

"Forget what he wants for now. He isn't here." She brushes her lips over my neck. "When this is over, you will have a new weapon in your arsenal."

The prospect of it relaxes me. Not only that. Her touches are intriguing, bringing forth new sensations that I never thought possible, but the lack of control over my actions has me tensing once more. She hushes me.

"Relax." She guides my hands to her breasts. "Let us begin this hunt."

Her red lips close over mine. [\[skip\]](#)

Heat. I am heat, but her hands are cool as she grips me, stroking slow, bringing me closer to the precipice by the neck. My focus slips. Tantalising agony. I grip the sheets beneath me in a futile effort to anchor myself.

"Know this, little shadow," she murmurs into my sweat-coated skin. "Understand this. They call this pleasure." She tightens her grip and I keen. "And this is pain. Two

edges of a blade. Use one or both. Pleasure can work just as well as or better than pain. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I whisper, shaky and tremulous.

"Now, I will show you anticipation." Something rises in me, building, called to the surface by her touch. My breaths quicken. I cannot stop the noises and my head spins and— She stops. The ocean retreats. I buck and cry for something I do not know or understand. She chuckles. "That, little shadow, is anticipation. Do it enough and you will break them. Do you break?"

I grit my teeth. "No."

"No? What do you do?"

I meet her red eyes with a determined glare. "I bend."

Her eyes squint in approval and she resumes her strokes.

"Bend, then."

I am still trembling even after I finish. A climax, she says. A goal or a point or an unreachable reward.

Or a weapon.

"Whatever you desire for it to be, whichever blade is needed for the moment," she says and smiles. "You painted such a beautiful picture for me. What lovely noises."

"What of you?" I ask.

She fans herself. "A gentleman. Querying after me. Truly, you are charming."

I stare at her for a moment, debating my choices and their consequences, but I place them aside. What a poor student I will make if I do not apply her teachings. I take advantage of her lax posture and flip our positions. She hits her pillows with a bewildered look.

"Well, well," she purrs. "You are a fast learner. If my brother weren't so selfish, I would keep you for days. Do you know what to do next?"

I hesitate. She does not mock or taunt, merely smiles and guides me.

"Very well. This time, you will be the hunter. Watch closely."

Daylight breaks and she remains languorous in her bed, watches as I dress myself with newfound focus. The lessons remain in my mind, placed beside the others. Ways of deception and blades and blood and magic and manipulation.

"You will bore quick," she says. I look up at her and she tilts her head back, neck and breasts displaying the marks I've left. "It is your nature. You will leave my brother the moment he becomes stagnant."

I stay silent. I cannot comprehend the thought of leaving him. Why will I?

“Lucky for you, the bastard is fickle. I suspect you will enjoy it for a few thousand years.”

“Not that I’m ungrateful,” I say, “but why did you teach me this?”

She tilts her head back forward to grin at me. “I want you armed to the teeth.” She shifts, the sheets slipping over her skin. “Our empire is young. It must be protected as it ascends to its true glory, and to remain in that golden era, it must cast a deep shadow. We have a responsibility to protect it. You now serve its protectors. You must be more than adequate.”

I consider this, and nod.

“And you are capable of being more than adequate.” She stares up at the ceiling in thought. “Will you come lay with me again?”

“I will have to respectfully decline.”

She sighs. “I suspected as much. Ah well, it is probably for the best.”

The door to her quarters slams open and he strides in, expression dark and thunderous, violet eyes gleaming like stones slicked by the rain.

“Andruil!” he bellows. “Does your licentiousness know no bounds?” He marches to her bed and she merely smiles up at him.

“It’s alright,” I say. That stops him and he turns to look at me, frown easing but not by much. I give him a dark and solemn smile. “She has given me a new weapon. I will cast a darker and deeper shadow.”

He falters, pursing his lips as he glares at Andruil.

She shrugs. “Let him learn, brother. It is who he is.” Her red eyes flick towards me, swift like an arrow. “The hunt remains ever changing. And now he is a hunter.”

Lavellan saw the image of a hawk and hare chasing the sun.

He leapt back as if stung, room shifting from darkness to light and back again. Lavellan stared at the glyphs but no new visions came, merely the hawk and the hare. Andruil’s sacred animals. If he focused, he could hear her voice, see the red of her eyes, feel the ghostly touches on bare skin. The memory came with the emotions, the swell and crest of the moment; not just a visual replayed to him but a broken piece returned to a scaffold. It took him a moment to return to himself.

“What the fuck,” he said, “was *that*?”

“She showed you how to fight another way, gripping, golden and gasping. Sometimes the shadows had to be warm, not cold.” He frowned. “They wanted a weapon. But you’re a person. I don’t get it. How can a person become a weapon? Weapons aren’t people.”

I wasn’t a person, not to them.

He closed his eyes, braced himself against the wall. The glyph’s green glow mocked him. His skin

crawled.

Questions spun and toppled in his mind and in his panic, he'd almost forgotten the glaring revelation that those memories implied.

He uncovered his face, still unsure of the many blanks in between, but one blank had been filled. Even if twenty more had risen in its place but that was just how it went.

"I was Elvhen," he whispered, eyes wide. "But... No. I have memories of— I? No, was it Mahanon? No, I *am* Mahanon, I don't—" He clutched at his hair and pulled.

"You were from Before," said Cole. "But also, after. You *are* Mahanon. You have to keep looking. A torn portrait, pieces pulling from unknown places. You have to find them to make it make sense."

"I don't know how to react," he admitted, lost in the dim room, searched the glyph for any more answers. He transferred that lost look to Cole. "I don't know who I am anymore."

"You're who you've always been."

"But I'm not," he snapped. Lavellan rubbed his face and paced. "[Ma uneolasas!](#)^[1]" he accused the Well. "[Ma tel'undirthas.](#)^[2]"

The Well hissed, [Tel'unav'ahnas!](#)^[3]

He chewed on his lip, and paused. If the Well knew, and if it was tied to Mythal, then did she know who he was?

No, fuck that. That wasn't the right question.

Did Mythal know Lavellan was currently holding the Well of Sorrows even if her temple had not been breached yet and would she have put two and two together? Idiot! That should have been his first concern. He faced Cole with a blank expression because everything was too much and impassivity was the safest option.

"One at a time," reminded Cole.

Lavellan glared at a spot on the wall. "I want to retire," he muttered.

They lay Lindiranae to rest at Var Bellanaris and the Dalish gradually warmed up to Lavellan and the Inquisition. They also contacted Empress Celene's troops across the bridge, so that was the Orlesian problem sorted.

Although his main concern at the moment...

The Veilfire flickered in the torch and Lavellan hesitated at the elven glyph.

"Is something wrong?" asked Dorian. He'd needed a mage for the Veilfire and damned if he wanted Solas along. Or Vivienne for that matter. She was too astute for his liking. Not that Dorian wasn't observant, rather, he was less suspicious. Cole lingered beside them.

“No, nothing,” said Lavellan and approached.

This glyph exhaled a nostalgic encounter.

She cowers in the corner, weeping. Her old master lies dead in a pool of his own blood in front of her, and the mirror shard in her pale, trembling hands is bloodstained. She looks up at me. Fearful. Her aura radiates it, almost suffocating. Impressive for one so young.

I tilt my head and hum, stepping over the dead body to crouch in front of her. I make sure to leave enough room so that she won't feel trapped.

“Have you come to kill me?” she asks. June’s vallaslin stretches over her face, her old master’s god of choice.

“I have come to kill him, actually,” I say and offer a warm smile. “You have done it for me.”

She drops the shard, her palms also cut, and she bows her head. “I am sorry, hahren. I did not— You are— I am sorry.”

“Why do you cry? Raise your head.” She does so. “How old are you?”

Her lips are trembling but she manages to answer, “Twelve.”

My mood darkens. “Do not feel sorry for this man.”

“But my master is of noble blood. The gods—”

“Sent me to rid our empire of him. The People are better off without his presence. You have done us a favour, da’len. Come, stand.” I offer her my hand and she takes it. My magic heals the cut the shard has inflicted. She stands, though she is shaky on her knees, so I slip my arms beneath her and carry her against me, placating her with a gentle blanket of my own aura.

“Your name?” I ask.

She holds on to my robes, gripping tight, still trembling. “I was not given one.”

I frown. “What do they call you then?”

“Sil’ve.” Memory.

“That is who you were before.”

She nods. “I am womb-born.” A spirit who has assimilated with a child still in their mother’s womb.

“What of your mother?”

“She sold me to Master Thenaven. I do not know her.”

“Has your magic manifested?”

In response, she summons a small, wisping flame. I hum. “No, that is not how you like to do it. Try again, as you would like, and not how others tell you to.”

She hesitates. We pass by an ornamental fountain. Her expression sets, determined, and she casts her hands out and grips. The fountain shatters and water sprays. I smile.

“Good,” I say.

“Where are you taking me?”

I look at her. “How would you like to learn to become one with the shadows?” I ask. “To be seen and unseen whenever you wish. To strike where you are needed. To watch and collect information. Elvhenan has no need for those like Thenaven.”

She looks down at her bloodstained hands. “Can I do that?” she asks, whispers.

“You will need to be trained. I will train you myself.”

Her gaze hardens and her lips flatten into a determined line.

“I would like to learn.”

She stands to attention when I sweep past. I stare at her and she stares back, defiant. No longer twelve. Now an adult in her own right, hardened by years of training, able to shift with the shadows and the water and become a knife or a poisoned chalice. Her hands never shake. June’s vallaslin which has once graced her face has changed to match mine.

I present her the dagger with the raven totem.

She stares at it, wide-eyed. I smile.

“As of today, you will join the ranks of the [El’ras’amelan^{\[4\]}](#),” I say. “You will answer directly to me.”

She takes the dagger with two hands and falls to one knee with her head bowed. “I will not disappoint you, [Ras’virelan^{\[5\]}](#).”

“Will you choose a new name for yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Rise. Tell me.”

She does so and she holds the dagger tight as she declares:

“Asunara.”

The memories ended and he was left with an image of two ravens, one gripping a mirror, the other a heart.

Memory. That was Memory. Asunara, her name had been.

A soft exhale left him. Faded pride welled within his chest, leaving with each string of his breath until he was left cold. The world pressed at him, heavy and chaining — this new world where they couldn't extend themselves, where they couldn't impress upon or discern the emotions and complex sentiments of each other when words would not suffice.

"Everything alright?" Dorian asked. "You've been silent for a while."

Lavellan blinked, gave Dorian a shaky smile, weathered through the flutter of compression. "Yeah. Let's... write it down. Need to have someone look at it later."

He left Dorian to it since he enjoyed doing it and staggered over to Cole, disoriented, breaths too thin. Cole supported him.

It was as if a sense had been taken from him.

No, not as if. It *had* been. The Veil had disconnected them. Lavellan scrunched his eyes shut and took in a trembling breath. It took him another few breaths before the press of the world became... *less*. Less. It felt less. He felt less. Diminished.

Something different.

He clenched his jaw.

"Nothing sings the same," said Cole.

He let go of Cole once he trusted his legs would hold. "I remember, but I'm still... It's still not complete."

"What did you see?"

"Memory. She was one of mine." Lavellan closed his eyes. "Did it hurt her? Seeing me, seeing that I couldn't recognise her?"

"Like a flash of fear, as if she was twelve again and you stand in front of her but this time, she'll return the favour. She carried the dagger in your name. You carried her so gently and offered her to be more. She wants to look after the world you loved." Cole looked at Lavellan under the brim of his hat. "She tried to keep you together when you shattered. Swept the broken glass into the frame and pieced it together even if she bled."

He rubbed his face. New terms had come up with that memory. Asunara had called him Ras'virelan. Shadow Walker? Or even Mist Walker. One who dwelled and walked in amorphous ambiguity.

"Ras'virelan," he murmured, tested it on his tongue.

"They started whispering," said Cole. "It's what they called you in fear. You took it. Made it into a title. They feared even more."

Still many holes in the narrative. Lavellan paused. Wait, if he'd been present in Elvhenan... Had he and Solas met? Did Solas know him?

"No," said Cole. Lavellan's shoulders slumped. He wasn't sure if it was out of relief or disappointment. "He doesn't remember you at all. But it's strange." He frowned. "The pieces should be next to each other when you don't remember because it didn't happen. But there's a space. Something's missing. I'm confused."

“You think something interfered with his memories?”

“I don’t know. I only see what you see and what your hurt touches.” He looked down and again, said, “I’m confused.”

Well, Lavellan supposed it was too much to ask for straightforward answers.

“Me too. Keep searching?”

Cole nodded.

Lavellan dreamt of the great raven leading him to an ancient bath.

The next morning, he approached Solas.

“Solas, you mentioned you'd dreamt of an ancient bath around here?”

Solas glanced up at him, in the middle of looking over the two glyphs they'd found.

“You would like to see it,” he surmised.

Lavellan nodded. “Can we go?” It was a risk, taking Solas, but there were no other options. It was faster this way, and their business in the Exalted Plains was slowly ending. Solas smiled.

“Of course,” he said. “When would you like to depart?”

He slung his bow over his back. “Now.”

If he picked up on Lavellan’s hurry, he said nothing of it, only grabbed his staff and necessities, and set off. Cole followed close behind.

The ancient baths were dilapidated, as Lavellan had expected, and it also held a rift. That had been a surprise. The three of them appeared to be enough though, and soon, Lavellan closed the rift, ears listening for the familiar tolling of the glyphs.

There.

“Solas, I think it’s a glyph,” he said as he ran his fingers over the faint shimmer over the stone.

“So it is.” He lit the Veilfire for him and Lavellan pulled it off its bracket with growing dread.

“Should we go back for paper?” he asked in hopes of stalling. Unfortunately, Solas was prepared and he took out sheafs of paper and charcoal from his satchel.

“I came prepared,” he said with a small smile.

Lavellan returned it, though it felt false. “What luck.”

He steeled himself and drew the Veilfire closer. The glyph hissed a rebellious whisper.

"You are foolish."

He smiles at me like the utter imp he is. "Am I?"

"You're stirring up Mythal's court with the change of your name."

"What? Felassan? I think it's clever."

"It was needless."

"Which? The name or the slow arrow?"

"Both."

Felassan chuckles, turns and faces me, squints. "Must you always do that?"

"Do what?"

He gestures. "The whole... shadow. Thing. I recognise that it's your entire persona and all, but you could do with some colour other than black."

My lips quirk. "I look good in black."

Felassan grumbles, plucks a blade of grass and twists it around his fingers. Mythal's vallaslin shifts on his face as he pulls his brows into a frown. "He was in her court. I don't see what the fuss is about. And I did serve under him for a while. He was a good commander. I'm simply honouring him."

"There's the problem. You're honouring him. You honour a man who's abandoned his duty to his god and has burned her mark off his face and is now off terrorising the People."

"Only the nobility."

"The nobility are still the People."

Felassan gives me a pointed look. "You can't keep doing that. When it's the People against the People, who do you protect then?"

I look away. "I protect those who need it."

"And who dictates that?" he asked, expression twisting into a dark scowl contradictory to his usual easy-going demeanour. "The Evanuris?"

"I do have things I do outside of orders, you know?" I muse dryly.

"And most of the good work you've done was outside orders." His eyes spark. "You don't have to keep following him—"

"Don't," I warn, voice dropping. The shadows curling around my ankles hiss. Felassan sighs and raises his arms in surrender.

"Alright," he says. "By the Void, you're all so dreary. At least he brings a little laughter into this whole dull affair."

"I'm glad you find mirth in his betrayal."

"You're so dramatic. It was hardly a betrayal."

"What is it then, if not that?"

Felassan lets go of the blade of grass and the wind carries it far away.

"Rebellion." He stares at me. "Freedom."

We stand in uncertain silence, his stare as steady as mine.

"You shouldn't say that to me," I say.

"Are you here to kill me, Ras?"

I can. It won't be hard. Let him turn back around and deliver a quick strike. Disable his magic without his knowing. Curdle his blood. Or it can be quick. Painless. There and gone. No more Felassan.

"I'm not here to kill you. Only reprimand you," I say instead. "And he is an Evanuris. No matter my grievances, I will defer."

"He doesn't consider himself one," says Felassan.

"Of course not. Besides, they know he hates it. It was a punishment, not a reward."

"He was Wisdom first."

"Mythal made him deliver orders instead of wisdom. Is it any wonder?" She has misused her tool, denied him of his true purpose. Wisdom becomes Pride.

I pause.

Or perhaps it's what she's wanted all along.

"Now, now, is that disapproval I hear?" Felassan asks. "I can't let you badmouth my deity like that."

"You bear Mythal's vallaslin but you've already declared for your true allegiance."

Felassan smiles slow. "I'd take his vallaslin, if he had one. But that would be counterproductive. He'd hate that. Besides, names are much more intimate, aren't they? You can be a hidden blade, I can be a slow arrow."

"Why do you follow him?"

"Why does anyone follow anyone?" Felassan's expression turns grim. "Ras, we're friends, aren't we?"

"When you're not annoying."

"Ah, splendid. So then." He slings an arm around my shoulder and leans in close, eyes crinkling with his hollow smile. "Our empire is rotting from the inside. You know that, don't you?"

I stay quiet.

“It rankles, doesn’t it? No matter how hard you scrub, the stain remains. But it’s not below that you should keep your eyes on.” He looks up at the sky. “Look above. There you’ll find your answer. Only if you want to open your eyes.”

“Careful,” I warn. “I may respect you and your loyalty to him, but if you say something treasonous in my presence, I will have to act.”

“Outside your presence?”

“I can’t be everywhere at once. Some things slip.”

He looks back at me, gaze solemn. “That’s quite telling. You know something is wrong. If you just—”

“Enough.”

“You can—”

“Final warning.”

“You remind me of him,” he murmurs. “You came through for them. Look what they do to you.”

“You know nothing.”

Felassan gives me a sad look. “I know too much.”

The memory stopped. The glyph showed an image of a pair of hands cupping the moon. Lavellan closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Lethallin?”

He took a deep breath, faced Solas with a casual hum. Solas frowned at him.

“Sorry, did I space out?” he asked. “I was thinking. Pardon, I’m in the way.” Lavellan stepped aside and left Solas to it. His gaze followed Lavellan as he moved, and he only relaxed once Solas looked away.

Once far enough, he collapsed against a ruined column, hand covering his face. Felassan... Yes, Felassan. There were faint emotions, faint impressions, which lingered in the peripheries of his awareness. Gone like morning dew beneath a summer sun. Hadn't Briala mentioned a mentor by that name?

Familiarity battled with the impassive disconnection one would feel towards a stranger. As if two parts of him couldn't agree on how anything fit properly. Not with too many pieces still missing.

He watched Solas' back and Cole sat beside Lavellan.

Lavellan had known of Solas back then, which was no great surprise, but had Solas known him in return? Confusing. Everything was confusing.

“Still missing,” said Cole.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. Maybe he could ask Briala about Felassan's whereabouts. He was likely still

helping Solas or acting in his name. Could he be at Skyhold? No, Felassan wasn't on Lavellan's listed Fen'Harel agents.

Cole stared at him. "He's nowhere," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"His friend had to die. He thought they were people." Cole wrung his fingers and Lavellan's heart sank. "A slow arrow breaks in the sad wolf's jaws."

Lavellan stared at Solas' back. Tears pricked, unbidden, but no emotion accompanied it.

"Ah," was all he said on the matter.

"He thought of her before he died. Lost home, lost people, lost girl." Had thought of Briala.

"Again and again," said Lavellan with a derisive laugh as he covered his eyes. "Sacrifice after sacrifice. Felassan was so loyal to him." So loyal. There was a stir of respect, and an echoing wave of mourning.

"He's starting to see what the Slow Arrow saw."

"And what will that amount to?" asked Lavellan, unbelievably tired. "In the end?"

"Hate hewn, but also, hope," said Cole. "How will it end, this time?" He gave Lavellan another of his soul-searching looks.

Lavellan fixed Solas' back another intent stare.

"It won't."

His dream had shown him the way to the final glyph in a ruin. There was an urgency to it.

Lavellan glanced at Solas' sleeping form near him, then stepped outside. The campfire embers twinkled like grounded stars.

Vergala perched on his shoulders and Cole joined him without a word.

The forests were eerie, yet serene, finally able to breathe after suffocating for far too long. As the days had passed, the orange haze of the sky had cleared. The Exalted Plains were healing.

Lavellan navigated the moonlit forests, favoured by the night.

They arrived at the ruins. He wasn't certain what they were the ruins of. Now, there were only crumbled bridges and collapsed entrances into what may have been tunnels.

And there the glyph was.

He stared at the Veilfire bracket and frowned.

"Wait," said Cole. "The one in the shrine still burns. It's close." He disappeared. Lavellan lingered in the forest and stared up at the brush of stars beyond the thin canopies. So many questions. So

few answers. He wasn't sure what to make of anything, wasn't sure who he was. How did he become Mahanon? From Elvhen to Dalish? Cole had adamantly insisted that he was Mahanon, that he'd been born Dalish too. How could that be?

A green flash of light caught his attention. Cole had arrived, passed Lavellan the Veilfire torch in his hand. Lavellan took it with a steady breath.

And so, the final glyph divulged its terrible, heavy, reverent revelation.

"Are you certain?" she asks.

"I trust him."

He looks at me, clever and beautifully poisonous. Violet eyes. Shade of wisteria. I want to serve him until the day I die. Use me. Brandish me. I will protect the People for you. I will kill the People for you. I will be your hidden blade.

"He is newly born," she says.

"And he's asked for me immediately. Not even a day old and yet he has already branded himself with my mark." He smiles. I do not trust the smile. It is a perfect smile. Perfect. He is perfect. "Have you named yourself yet?"

I utter his.

He laughs — warm syrup, cold edge. I do not trust his laugh either. An unknown sensation passes through me, but it makes me itch, makes me want to tear through the skies and... Emotions. It will take me a while to recognise them. I will call this feeling yellow. I know colours. Joy is yellow. Maybe it is joy.

"No, no, that is my name. You cannot use it. No matter, allow yourself time. It will come to you."

"Name me," I say.

"No."

I defer. No questions. Whatever he seeks.

"Fascinating," says the other one. She is sharp, blue, bright. Justice. Vengeance. Voices melodious. "Such loyalty already. Quite peculiar too, for one such as it. He now, I suppose."

He walks to me and crouches so he can look me in the eyes. They call me child, still. I am small.

"Do you want to fly?" I ask him. I am small, but I can be bigger. "I can help you fly."

He looks back at the sharp, blue one. The one he calls Mother. He smiles. "He means to shapeshift. Already."

She hums. "Good find, then. Let's see it shall we?"

It hurts. Everything here does not change as I bid it to, but I will make it. I will make

myself change. I can do it. I change myself to better give him the sky and darkness he so adores to dwell in.

“My, my,” says the Mother. “That is impressive.”

His delight makes me violet. Deeper violet than his eyes. Pride. Proud? Proud. He climbs upon my back and I stretch my mighty wings, challenging the skies. He and I will fight it. Can fight it. He and I will soar within it and my shadow will stretch across this great empire, and I will dedicate that shadow to him. My shadow is his. I will extend his reach to cover this realm.

I will be his greatest weapon.

I taunt the sky as I take flight and we are unstoppable, together. Make me into art. Let me see you use me as your brush in your masterful pieces, your careful secrets.

If you fail, I will ruin you.

Lavellan saw Dirthamen on the back of a great and terrible raven.

He stepped back from the wall with a gasp, head pounding, the forest spinning around him. Dirthamen, it was Dirthamen. He'd served Dirthamen. The god with the violet eyes and Lavellan still didn't know anything.

Cole caught him as he staggered back. He lowered Lavellan onto the floor and stayed with him while he waited for the world and his head to stop whirling.

“Did you see?” Cole asked.

He traced the familiar lines of his vallaslin, stared at the glyphs, but no more visions came besides the one of Dirthamen on the raven. If he focused, he could discern his violet eyes.

“I did,” Lavellan said, tasted veneration on his tongue. “I came for him. I came through for him.”

“Like I came through for Cole?”

“You wanted to help Cole but I... I devoted myself to him.” He covered his face, still unsure of the many blanks in between. Lavellan closed his eyes. Devotion on his lips. He wiped the back of his hand against his mouth but the taste would remain. Thick. Had finally escaped to the surface. He had to revile it. Otherwise, he didn't know what he would do because it wasn't just on his lips. It was in his soul, the very fibre of his being, a vital thread upon which the others were anchored. He couldn't dedicate himself to a god locked away. Should not. Would not.

He had had enough of gods, enough of reverence, enough of worship, and now, actual people needed him. The ones who lived on this bloody world. They needed him, and they couldn't afford to lose him.

“Weary as you watch over the world. I told you that you loved it.”

“So you did,” he sighed. “Wretched.”

“You still love it.”

Lavellan hung his head, heart and soul heavy, and looked up at Cole with a hollow smile.

“Sometimes, I wish I didn’t.”

And his eyes softened in sympathy. “No. You don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

And there we go. The what-if that started this fic.

Whew, a bit of a loaded chapter. (And that first scene with Andruil was not meant to be nice. I had debated on whether to keep it or not and ultimately decided to keep it. But yes, she took advantage of Lavellan's inexperience and vulnerability and further warped his image of himself as nothing but a weapon, an object to be utilised).

collective groans from everyone because oh my god an Elvhen MC AGAIN??? Really??? Hasn't that been done to death in solavellan fics?? Ahaha...

I am also really apprehensive about the direction I'm taking the story in. There's always a risk when you run off with canon lore and introduce change (haha, Change) to the base game. And another risk of the story getting too difficult to steer. Let's see if I manage to not trip over my own threads while weaving the story (I'm horrid at textiles. Maybe I should've picked a better metaphor).

Good job to those who theorised a connection to Dirthamen. I've been laying it on thick with the ravens and imagery. Some of Cole's cryptic shit in past chapters probably make some sense now.

Also, I love Felassan, rip him from my cold dead hands. He and Briala were the best characters in The Masked Empire, no my mind cannot be changed. My bark-eating idiot <3

Translation:

[1] **Ma uneolasas!:** You knew!^[1]

[2] **Ma tel'undirthas!:** You didn't tell me!^[1]

[3] **Tel'unav'ahnas!:** You didn't ask!^[1]

[4] **El'ras'amelan:** The Keepers of Secrets and Shadows. Can be shortened to El'amelan (Secret Keepers)^[1]

[5] **Ras'virelan:** Shadow Walker^[1]

Blood in the promise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

branded as fool and traitor—

Most of his companions returned to Skyhold but small group of them remained to escort the fragment of Clan Venalin back to the main bulk of them in the Emerald Graves. Their group comprised of Cole, who'd refused to leave Lavellan, and Solas, Dorian, and Bull, who were familiar faces for the Dalish.

Besides, Bull had already made some friends in the clan. Loranil in particular had taken a shining to Bull, and Lavellan couldn't help but be reminded of an overexcited puppy eternally wagging its tail whenever he trailed after Bull. Lavellan wracked his head and tried to recall if Loranil and Bull had been friends in the past timeline, but came up blank. Apparently, his poor head had limited capacity. To nobody's surprise. Lavellan only hoped that the things he'd forgotten weren't important details.

"So, it's just us," said Dorian.

"The dream team," said Bull. "Get it? 'Cause Solas— Never mind."

"You are not funny," Dorian grumbled.

Lavellan grinned. "I thought he was funny."

Bull nodded at Lavellan. "There's a man with taste."

Solas rolled the drawings of the elven glyphs, tucked them carefully into his satchel, and passed it onto an elven scout. Lavellan eyed them. The scout was solemn as he nodded at Solas and accepted them.

He noticed Lavellan looking and scurried away. Solas looked back at Lavellan.

Lavellan plastered on a fake smile and gestured Solas over. He hadn't survived three years of attempted assassinations from Fen'Harel agents just to not notice when one was right there. So far, he'd tracked at least twenty agents currently in Skyhold, but he had a longer, more comprehensive list of all the agents that Lavellan remembered. Some of the agents he'd listed weren't even in the Inquisition yet, but he'd tick them off once they show up in the recruitment list. The numbers were growing. Nothing compared to the numbers during the Exalted Council. Not yet.

"One last hurrah?" he asked the group with false cheer. When did it become so easy to put on a mask? Cole gave him an astute look but said nothing. "It'll probably take three hours on the aravel. Bull, are you alright to ride on horseback as escort?"

"Yeah. Don't want your shiny halla attracting unwanted attention."

"Just wave our staff around," said Dorian. "Guaranteed to send any would-be bandits running."

"Dorian, that's dirty," teased Bull.

"Vishante kaffas."

Lavellan chuckled and shook his head, helped the Dalish load items into the aravels. Solas assisted Anaria onto hers, her hand rubbing her swollen belly as she offered Solas a grateful smile.

The aravels fell into formation, the front occupied by the Keeper. The central aravels carried precious cargo and passengers, Anaria and Hanal'ghilan in their case, flanked by the aravels carrying the fighters. Lavellan's group stayed on the rear aravel.

Loranil waved at them from the left flank and Lavellan returned the enthusiastic greeting. Keeper Hawen had given Loranil the blessing to return with them to Skyhold, on the condition that he would reunite with the rest of Clan Venalin to say his farewells first.

Their journey began and Vergala followed overhead. Lavellan beamed as the aravels moved, the familiar rumble of the wheels beneath him plucking on the strings of nostalgic memories as it soothed through his bones.

"You seem happy," remarked Dorian.

He laughed, carefree and spirited. "I haven't ridden the aravels in a long time. Little things I'd taken for granted." He hadn't met the rest of Clan Venalin last time. He couldn't recall why. Maybe too busy?

Solas remained quiet at the back, writing into a leather-bound journal with his charcoal while Cole sat beside him and watched. Solas occasionally glanced up at Lavellan. Then back to scribbling.

"Listing counterpoints for our next potential debate?" Lavellan asked and the corner of Solas' lips curled.

"I have no need to pre-prepare my counterpoints. I can keep up with you just fine."

Lavellan smiled and scoffed, ready for a retort, but the Dalish started a call and response travel song and Lavellan gasped in recognition, joined them in glee.

Two hours into their trip, Lavellan nodded off.

He dreamt of ravens.

Violet eyes.

He woke with a start, breaths rapid. The aravel was still moving. Solas was staring down at him, his hand on Lavellan's arm, and Lavellan blinked, bleary, head heavy.

"Solas?" he rasped.

"We are close," he said.

That woke Lavellan up. He rocked the small aravel as he rushed to the side and looked out into lush greenery of the Emerald Graves. Mighty trees reached for the skies, draped in curtains of ivy, vines and fern, the forest floor a sea of vivid green grass with a flotsam of wildflowers. Branches bowed and curved, writing their messages across the sky.

Solas followed at a calmer pace, looking upon the forest with a soft hum. Dorian roused from his nap, yawned and stretched, took in his surroundings with a groggy look.

Lavellan relished the patch of warmth from the sunlight peering past the leaves, closed his eyes and smiled as the light burst behind his eyelids.

“It has changed much since I was last here,” murmured Solas.

“Was it just as beautiful?” Lavellan asked.

A pause.

Then, “It is different.”

Lavellan opened his eyes, beheld the forest. Blades of light fell in a dappled shower and painted the forest floor like a child splattering colours upon every available surface after discovering paint for the first time.

While the green of the Fade was strident, flaring like a broken sun, the green of the Emerald Graves was serene — a simple melody content to be bare and unornamented.

“See how the light falls like rain past the spaces of the leaves?” Lavellan asked, quiet, as if he were speaking his first secret.

“Yes,” Solas returned, just as quiet. The aravel rumbled, the foliage rustling with the gentle exhales of wind, the wildlife calling out into the forest.

“This is one of my favourite sights,” said Lavellan.

Solas looked at him, meant to say something, but they spotted the expanded aravels in the near distance, their canvases unfurled from within to act as small shelters or homes. The elves of Clan Venalin made a commotion at their arrival, yelling in relief, exclaiming their praises of the gods for the Keeper’s safe arrival.

They paused at the sight of the giant Qunari at the front.

And drew their weapons.

Lavellan sighed.

The Dalish kept a wary eye on them as Keeper Hawen discussed with the clan elders and vouched for Lavellan and the Inquisition’s hospitality, holding up Lindiranae’s talisman and gesturing at Hanal’ghilan.

They weren’t tied up at least, but the Dalish had still confiscated their weapons and had herded Lavellan’s group off to one place, guarded by a few elves. Cole flitted around the clan unnoticed.

“Suspicious lot, aren’t they?” Dorian asked as they sat.

“They have to be or they’d be dead,” said Lavellan.

If Solas’ disapproval could manifest physically, Lavellan was sure it would have throttled him.

The other elves in the clan went about their day, but they would occasionally send their group glances.

Lavellan’s gaze fell on the group of young hunters — so young that they were still barefaced —

working through drills by the edge of the clan's encampment. They were being led by the adolescent girl who'd mouthed off at him during his first encounter with Clan Venalin. What was her name? Revasha?

He watched their form and manoeuvres through a Warleader's eyes and grumbled at the sloppiness of their elbow before their strikes. Revasha would probably bite his fingers off if he so much as offered advice though. Besides, he mustn't take over another's job.

But wait, where was the Warleader?

Lavellan's stomach sank. Was their Warleader dead?

Furthermore, where were the older hunters? Lavellan searched but couldn't find them. Rather, the ones he found were *too* old. Even the elves guarding them looked far too old, closer to Keeper Hawen and Olafin's age.

Lavellan frowned, searched and searched for the younger and experienced hunters, to no avail.

The bush behind them rustled. Bull stared at it, then parted the leaves.

A little boy peered at them, frozen in place. No, there were more. There were three of them, guileless eyes staring. Bull blinked. They blinked back.

[“Da’lenen^{\[1\]},”](#) Lavellan scolded softly, “you shouldn’t be here. Your parents might get upset.”

“Mae says you’re Harellan,” the boy with the green eyes said to Lavellan. “She says you will bite.”

“Who am I, Fen’Harel?” Lavellan grumbled. The children’s eyes widened in fear and he quickly raised his arms in placation. “No, no, I was joking. It was a jest. Joking.”

Solas’ mood soured further.

“*Are* you Fen’Harel?” the little girl asked, dark-haired and freckled.

“No,” Lavellan insisted. “Come now, do you really think Fen’Harel would joke that he’s Fen’Harel if he’s in disguise? That’s too obvious.”

They looked at each other and nodded as if that made perfect sense.

“So who are you?” asked the other boy, meek, curls catching on the branches in the bush.

Lavellan smiled. “I am Mahanon of Clan Lavellan. No, I am not a Harellan,” he added once they opened their mouths, had already anticipated their next question. They closed their mouths.

“You could be lying,” said the little girl, squinting at him. She tried. The look missed the mark of suspicious and instead landed in the realm of endearing.

“Would someone who looks this princely be a liar?” asked Dorian, gesturing with a flourish at Lavellan.

Lavellan pulled a face. “Dorian, I’m caked in dirt.”

“A princely dirt-caked man.”

The children stared at Dorian in mild apprehension. “You’ve got hair on your face,” said the little girl.

“Can I touch it?” asked the boy.

“Uh,” said Dorian.

The little girl gasped and patted Bull’s cheek. “He’s got some too! It’s kind of rough.”

Bull looked at Lavellan with a plea in his eye.

“Whoa, he’s got an eyepatch!”

“His head’s so smooth!” said the curly-haired boy and patted Solas’ head. He looked ready to enter uthenera again. Lavellan pursed his lips in silent laughter, the only one untouched.

“Please don’t pull,” muttered Dorian as they patted his moustache.

“[Tundrast](#)^[2],” Lavellan reminded.

He waited for their parents to appear and shriek and grab them and stop them from crawling all over them, but nobody batted an eye. Not even the elves who were guarding them.

“Hm,” he said.

“Do share,” said Solas, unimpressed as the children ran their hands over his head and cooed at how smooth it was.

“I think,” said Lavellan, “that we will be stuck with these children for a while.”

“Where are their parents?” Dorian asked.

“They’re not going to come,” Lavellan said. “The children are meant to be here to torment us.”

They fell quiet, the children occasionally squealing in delight.

Dorian broke the silence and said, “I hate children. Maker forbid I touch or interact with a child in my life ever again.”

Vergala must have sensed their growing distress because she descended and perched on Lavellan’s shoulder. Their starry-eyed looks transferred to him. Oh no.

The children overran him and Vergala cawed in alarm and flew off.

“Traitor,” he groaned. He got trampled on for nothing.

In the end, the clan leaders accepted their group, but by that time, night had fallen and the children had eviscerated them.

Bull closed his eye, braided flowers hanging off his horns, and kept up a mantra of, “I am terrifying, I can make an adult piss themselves. I am scary.”

Anaria approached and offered them a warm smile. “I’m terribly sorry about that,” she said. “We never get anywhere when old people argue.”

“Please,” said Solas, “you must be resting.”

She stretched her back with a scrunched expression. “I suppose so. I’m close, I think.”

“All the more reason for you to sit.”

“Come to the fire with us,” she invited. “The clan is throwing a small celebration for our safe return but you may stay with us even longer, if you need. You are welcome here.”

Keeper Hawen joined her, expression weary, but triumphant.

“I have convinced the irritable ones, da’len,” he said.

Lavellan laughed. “Begrudgingly?”

“Olafin’s word is well-respected. He has vouched for you as well. Come, rise.” His gaze fell on the flowers around Bull’s horns and he smiled. “Ah, yellow. They mean friendship.”

“Oh,” said Bull, disposition doing a quick one-eighty. He grunted, but it was soft at the edges. “That’s... fine, I guess.” Lavellan hid his smile. Oh yeah, could make an adult piss themselves alright. The terrible Iron Bull.

“Perhaps it would be best if we retained distance,” suggested Solas. “Make camp elsewhere. We do not wish to impose or become a source of discomfort.”

“What nonsense,” said Keeper Hawen. “Come, come, tell us your tales and dreams. I know a few who would love to hear them.”

Solas looked down, morose. “I have spoken to many Dalish before, had told them of my tales and dreams. They did not deign to listen. Mocked and rallied. This time will be no different.”

“Ah,” said Keeper Hawen and crouched. “It grieves me to hear this. I understand your apprehension now, da’len—” Solas’ lips twitched at the address but only Lavellan caught the movement— “but I will do my best to provide you with a voice tonight, should you wish to share it.”

Lavellan nudged Solas’ shoulder with his. He looked up at Lavellan, darkness and defeat lingering in the depths of his eyes. Lavellan offered him a small, encouraging smile.

Try, he wished to say. *Try*.

“You are a terrible influence,” Solas muttered. Lavellan beamed. “*One* story,” said Solas as he stood and Keeper Hawen smiled.

“The floating citadel?”

“We shall see.”

Lavellan and his group rose. Bull agonised over what to do with the flowers and Dorian rolled his eyes, took them off his horns, and draped them around Bull’s neck instead.

They approached the central fire. Big enough for warmth, but not so big that it might attract unwanted attention. The cooks fussed over their dishes, the youths sat themselves in loose groups according to age groups or friends, and the rest milled about between the expanded aravels. He spied a few who were already asleep inside. A Dalish clan could be like a small village in its own right.

He paused, absorbing the scene before him. Homesickness once again tore at his chest and he could imagine himself sitting with the hunters in Clan Lavellan, laughing and sharing jokes or

arguing over who was the better shot.

Solas looked back when he noticed that Lavellan had stopped.

“Lethallin?” he asked. Lavellan shook his head and caught up.

“Homesick, is all,” he said.

The four of them sat by the fire but Keeper Hawen dragged Solas by the back of his coat like a disgruntled cat would its young. The children from earlier also returned, had brought along their friends, and hauled Bull away.

“Mercy, Dorian—!” cried Bull, small hands pulling him along.

“Have fun,” Dorian called, and chuckled once Bull was out of earshot. “Children sense it.”

“Which?”

“When someone’s actually a soft sod inside.”

“Did you see his face when he found out what the flowers meant?”

Dorian laughed. “He’s never going to take it off, I wager.”

“Oh no, I’m not taking that wager. I’ll lose.”

“A wise man you are.”

Lavellan stole a glance at Solas. He was sitting as if there was a metal rod down his spine and Lavellan pursed his lips, unsure if he wanted to suppress a grimace or nervous laughter. He hoped it would end well.

“He was drawing you.”

He looked at Dorian. “What?”

“On the aravel. He was drawing you. Quite well too, actually.”

The leather-bound journal—

Lavellan turned his head away. “Oh?” he asked, feigning indifference.

Dorian threw his head back and laughed. “*Oh*, he says. I see that smile you’re fighting to hold back.”

“What are you doing?” Lavellan asked, bleary as he awoke to the soft morning light scattering colour across the room from the stained glass of his balcony doors. Solas was already up, writing into a leather-bound journal, leaning against the headboard. A strip of red and orange light was gilding his collarbones.

“Good morning,” Solas greeted and smiled, closed the book and set it down so he could comb his fingers through Lavellan’s hair. Lavellan smiled back.

“Morning.”

“Sleep well?”

He hummed, smile widening. "How could I not? You exhausted me last night." His gaze fell on the leather-bound journal on Solas' lap. "Were you writing?"

"Drawing."

"What?"

"You."

He sputtered.

"You looked endearing. I wished to capture the moment."

Lavellan buried his face into the pillow. "Was I drooling?" he asked, muffled.

"Yes, quite. I feared Skyhold would flood with how—"

Lavellan rose and hit his face with a pillow.

The memory was simple, faded and blurred, vignetted with light, but Lavellan could still recall the lazy warmth with far too much ease.

And soon came the inevitable descent of his heart twisting.

His smile faded, hadn't realised he was smiling in the first place. Dorian stared at him, worry and firelight dancing in his eyes.

"You *are* allowed to be happy about that, you know?" asked Dorian.

Believe me, I'd like for it to stay that way, he didn't say. Instead, he said, "I know."

Silence elapsed.

A sharp stare prickled on his nape. He glanced over his shoulder and met Revasha's intense look. She held his gaze in challenge, squinted, then looked away and listened to the rest of her peers speaking. Lavellan frowned.

They stayed quiet by the fire for a moment longer before a little girl came up to Dorian and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Um, excuse me?" she asked.

Dorian blinked at her. "Er, hi, yes? Was there something you needed?"

"The mor'sa said you know how to make lightning?"

"The who?"

"Big one," translated Lavellan. "Bull, I think."

"I want to make lightning in a bottle," she said. "The Keeper doesn't do lightning. Is it possible?" She bit her lip, shuffled her feet, a tad timid. It must have taken her a great deal of courage to approach Dorian.

Dorian stared at her for a moment, then he smiled and clapped his hands. "Why not? Tell me of this lightning in a bottle plan of yours."

Her face lit up and she grabbed Dorian's arm and hauled him up. He sent Lavellan an apologetic look but Lavellan chuckled and waved him off as the little girl dragged him away. Lavellan contented himself with staring at the fire, occasionally watching Solas cautiously tell his story.

But Solas relaxed as time passed, the tense line of his shoulders slackening. His gestures soon grew larger, expression even softening into a faint smile.

Meanwhile, Lavellan found himself alone, and he had an idea why. The rumours were still around.

Harellan, they said. Traitor to one's kin. Traitor to his clan.

It... stung, he would admit. A little.

Home but not quite.

Nobody approached him, only kept a wary eye on him, so he remained on his log and stared at the fire and busied himself with playing with a blade of grass.

He looked up, blinked at the stars, heart aching.

The night wore on. A few approached him and made polite conversation but he could sense their skittishness.

He glanced at Solas once more. Solas was now using his magic to create simple images to accompany his stories. Maybe Lavellan could go up and listen. It looked interesting. Better than moping here and plucking away at the grass.

Solas was smiling. He suddenly seemed much younger.

Lavellan watched from a distance instead. He had no wish to disrupt the easy atmosphere they'd established among them.

The Dalish started a dance around the fire at one point and he hummed along to their song, otherwise wishing he could join, but suspected that that would make them uncomfortable and that was the last thing he wanted. So he stayed. And watched. And gave it all a sad smile.

He missed Clan Lavellan.

He missed home.

Amidst the merriment, he slipped away into the darkness of the forest.

His leg swung as it hung off the branch he was resting on, his other leg pulled up to his chest so he could rest his elbow on it. Vergala had perched herself on the space just ahead of him. It was quiet. The sounds of the celebration was faint, could always be lost to the howling of the wind. Lavellan's head fell back against the tree trunk.

He stared at the stars instead.

If he closed his eyes, he could pretend that the cheers of the Dalish in the distance were coming from his clan. That if he were to walk back, Ellana would be there, sharing an interesting thing

she'd learned for that day. Aenoreir would present his daily challenge. His hunters would discuss the winter's rations with him, which hunts to prioritise, measures to protect against bandits and how secure they would be while camping outside a certain settlement. Would smell rabbit stew and salted boar. Would taste honeyed bread on his lips. Would hear children's laughter as they demanded he tell them a story or teach them how to use a bow.

Vibrant trees surround the fortress on the mountain, the sea in the distance visible from certain vantage points. Flowers teem along the walls. It is our home, away from the rest of the world, and the eluvians shimmer like the tyrian of a violent sunset.

"Ras, the varterral's gone clingy again."

"I told you to stop feeding it, Vedir."

"But it's so cute."

"You have a strange definition of cute."

Lavellan blinked, settling back into the present like a twirling leaf resting on a calm lake. That was... interesting. Triggered by homesickness?

Something in him was longing for two different homes.

Soft footsteps caught his attention, swift, practiced, but heavy on the left foot. Had he been anybody else, he wouldn't have heard it.

"You shouldn't be wandering this far," he called out, though he was unsure as to who they were. Someone from the clan? "It's dangerous."

Silence. Lavellan waited, didn't bother looking. If he was in danger, Vergala would have let him know.

"How did you know I was here?" they asked. "I was quiet!"

He looked down. It was Revasha, her bow in her hand.

"I've thwarted would-be assassins for years," he said. "I like to think I've picked things up."

She frowned. "What?"

Lavellan waved her off. "Don't worry. Go back before you worry anyone."

"Why are you out here?" she asked, suspicion laced within her tone. He smiled at her.

"Ah, I see. You see the suspicious elf sneaking out and assumed the worst. Don't worry, he just wanted to roam the forest and climb a tree and avoid being shot at by a hunter. Whatever conjecture you have is false."

"I wasn't trying to shoot at you. The bow's just a precaution."

"Relieving. Off you go on your merry way then."

Revasha didn't move.

He sighed. "Is there something else?"

"You're strange," she said.

"Very astute, thank you. Anything else?"

"Stop patronising me," she snapped.

Lavellan stared at her, proud and furious, a whirlwind of fire and storm, and for a moment, Lavellan saw himself in his youth. Though less tempestuous. Definitely proud.

His plan had failed. He bit his lip until it bled and weathered the scolding from the Warleader for such a risky strategy, his head bowed. It had failed. Damn it all, it had failed. They lost the deer. They needed the deer.

"I wasn't," he said. "But mind your temper. A good Warleader needs to be able to keep a level head."

"I—" She frowned. "You think I'm the Warleader?"

"You've been leading the drills. You seem a little young, though. Where are your older hunters?"

"Most of them died defending us from the shems," she said, forced her voice to be steady, but he caught the slight waver in it and his disposition softened. "The others have gone off with our First to some ruin deeper in the Graves. My mother... She was the Warleader."

"I'm sorry," said Lavellan and meant it. "We helped Keeper Hawen bury some of your dead in Var Bellanaris. Was your mother among them?"

"She was. And my father." Oh, shit. Her stance relaxed slightly. "Do you think I'll make a good Warleader?"

"You have the potential, but your temper and pride worry me," he answered truthfully. "Pride is good to be assured. You need to be assured. But never let it hinder your ability to listen. Anger is good for when you need it to protect, but don't rely on it too much. It dulls your senses and your focus."

"Your advice is unsolicited, Harellan," she said.

His expression hardened at the term. "You're right. Ir abelas, da'len. Begone then."

She still stayed there. Lavellan ignored her and stared back out into the forests. The Freemen of the Dales were somewhere further south. Clan Venalin had to be careful, especially if they were lacking experienced hunters.

"You don't deny it," she said. "When I call you Harellan. You don't deny it." She frowned up at him in uncertainty. "Are you really?"

"I know it to be false and I take comfort in that. I don't care what others say about it. Call me traitor all you want. I know it's not true."

"You're strange," she said again.

"You'll have to pardon me if I'm not feeling up to being insulted right now. Leave me be."

“No, you— You feel strange. You’re not who you say you are.”

Lavellan stared at her, thought that over. “Who do you think I am? Please don’t say Fen’Harel, that’s just unoriginal.”

“I don’t think you’re the Dread Wolf. I’m not stupid. But there’s something not right about you.” Lavellan stood and walked on the branch, hands behind his back. It was thick and sturdy enough to support him. “Is it because you’ve been around shems too long?”

“No,” he said. “I can’t answer you because I don’t even know what you’re asking. Whatever you deem isn’t right about me, I don’t want to hear it either.” He crossed over to the opposite tree’s branch and followed that down to the trunk since it connected at a spot low enough that he could hop off without pain. “I’m going, don’t follow me.”

Vergala took off from the tree and perched on his shoulder.

“Wait,” Revasha called out and Lavellan groaned.

“Creators, you don’t know when to give up, do you? What do you want?”

She held her ground and looked up at him, steadfast. “Teach me,” she said.

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve known your Inquisition has been on the Plains even before we’d met. I scouted. To make sure the shemlens wouldn’t come near us and to find where they never went. Then you and your soldiers came. I’ve been following you all for a while, and I’ve seen you fight. The Keeper also said you used to be the Warleader of Clan Lavellan. Everyone knows that Clan Lavellan has a history of raising good hunters.” Revasha clenched her fists and her shoulders rose. “Teach me how to fight. How to be a Warleader.”

Lavellan stared at her, somewhat stunned.

“And teach me how to walk as quietly as you do,” she continued. “And how to hear the softest things as you do.”

A tense silence stretched between them.

He breathed out a short laugh. “I’m pretty sure that’s demanding, not asking.”

“Fine, *please* teach me.”

Lavellan considered her. Her lips were pressed. How long had she wanted to ask this?

“You’ve been a little rude, da’len,” he said. “Why should I?”

“I—” Revasha looked down at her feet, hands fisted by her sides. “I need to be stronger to protect the clan.”

He blinked, unmoved. Revasha rubbed her arm and looked up at him, mouth pulled.

“Ir abelas, hahren,” she said. Hahren. Damn, he felt old. “My manners have been poor. Will you please take me as a student?”

Lavellan stared, stayed quiet and stretched the moment until she fidgeted. Only then did he answer.

“Lesson one done, you’ve swallowed your pride,” he said and her eyes lit up with tentative hope. He smiled. “Your left foot is heavy, did you know?”

It was almost dawn, the sky still a mellow lilac. He took a moment to admire how solemn the trees stood as they saluted the coming day. Lavellan slipped his coat on and ran the logistics of today’s lesson with Revasha.

Something rustled behind him, footsteps accompanied by the soft tones of wooden wolves.

“You’re up early,” Lavellan remarked.

“As are you. Unless you did not sleep?”

“I slept.”

“Good,” said Solas. Lavellan could almost hear him tilting his head in curiosity. “I did not see you last night. I expected you would be more involved with the festivities seeing as you have been homesick for quite some time.” He made a soft noise. Almost a scoff, but not quite. “I believe I may have spent more time with the Dalish than you, the actual Dalish elf.”

Lavellan straightened his coat and shot him a small smile. “I wasn’t approached. They’ve been treating me with caution.”

He frowned, eyes grey in the morning light. “Why? You are one of them. I thought they might appreciate a familiar face.”

“There were rumours,” said Lavellan as he retrieved his leather vambrace, “that I am Harellan.”

“What?” he bit out. “You are no traitor. You have—” He cut himself off with an incensed shake off his head. Lavellan’s smile turned amused. Was he angry on Lavellan’s behalf or was he seeing too much of himself in Lavellan? His grip around his staff tightened at Lavellan’s smile. “Why are you smiling? Are you not angered?”

“No.” His smile faded into something hurt. “Lonely? Yes.”

Solas' expression fell. It wasn't an obvious change, but Lavellan had long since been attuned to him. Most times.

“Do they not understand the lengths you have gone through to ensure their safety? Their happiness?” asked Solas. “You've worked ceaselessly and without complaint for their sake and this is how they repay you? By shunning you?” His voice rose in its familiar fevered pitch as it became impassioned. “By spreading false rumours and reviling you?”

Lavellan’s heart ached. He wasn’t just talking about Lavellan, was he?

“Solas,” he murmured, placed his hand on Solas' shoulder to calm him. “It’s alright.”

“No, it is not,” he hissed. “I will not content myself watching you bleed out for your people when they would not even deign to acknowledge your efforts or thank you.”

“I don’t do it to be thanked. I’ve long known this is a thankless job.”

“That is not the point!”

“What, then?” asked Lavellan.

“The point is that you have people who have vouched for your sincerity and yet they would still dare to pin their suspicions upon you. They are your own people and yet— You do not deserve this kind of treatment, you—” He sighed, turned away and closed his eyes. Lavellan withdrew his hand. “Ir abelas, lethallin. I am... cross.”

“I see that,” Lavellan said with a small smile, but he had little strength left to maintain it. “It stung, yes. It should have felt like home and yet it wasn’t. It wasn’t the same.” The hidden regrets resurfaced in Solas’ eyes. “Instead of open arms and dances and songs around the fire, I was sequestered, left alone, maybe even feared.”

“And you are fine with this?” Solas asked, bordering on hurt.

“No,” Lavellan admitted softly. “No, I’m not fine. Who would be? But it’ll be alright. I understand their suspicion and I know why it’s necessary for them to be so. But at this point, the Dalish treasure actions over words. I know I’m no traitor but how can *they* be sure? I have to build trust first.”

“But you have helped. They know it.”

“I’d suspect a hidden agenda, if I were them. We were betrayed by acts of apparent kindness one too many times.” He took his bow and slung it over his back. “It’ll take some time.”

“How can one build trust when they will not even approach you?”

Footsteps neared, attempting to be soft, but again, the left foot was too heavy.

“Revasha, left,” Lavellan reminded without looking.

Revasha appeared from behind a tree, scowling with a huff, geared and ready.

“I thought I had you,” she said.

“Not when you stomp around like a bronto.”

Her expression soured. “Are you ready?”

“Go ahead, I’ll be there soon.”

She frowned at him, then at Solas, before she turned and walked off. Lavellan clipped his belt around his waist and stretched, shook out his limbs to loosen them, and faced Solas again.

“Well, I’ll be going,” he said.

“Where to?”

“She wants to be taught so I’ll teach her,” he said. “And to answer your question, you’re right. But there are always those willing to reach out to you, who are curious or otherwise. Not everyone is alike. There’s always that one person willing to listen.” He smiled. “You reach out to them, and they reach out to others.”

“That is not always the case,” murmured Solas.

“No,” agreed Lavellan. “But sometimes, it is. Who would’ve thought that the teenager snapping at me would’ve liked to learn something? People can surprise you.”

He stared at Lavellan, something unrecognisable shimmering in his eyes, and Lavellan could only hope it was introspection.

Lavellan smiled and bumped his shoulder. “I saw you telling your stories. You looked like you were having fun.”

Solas frowned to himself. “It... Yes. To an extent.”

“I’m glad,” he said. “You have wondrous things to share. I’m glad you were able to.”

Solas stared at him, frown easing. “You could have sat in. I believe you would have enjoyed the story.”

“I didn’t want to intrude.”

“You could never.”

Lavellan looked away, absentmindedly admitted, “I like keeping our storytelling sessions between us.”

He stilled at the admission, the tip of his ears warming.

“Not that I want you to stop telling other people stories,” he hurriedly amended. “That’s not what I meant. Keep doing that. I simply meant—”

Solas was smiling.

“I need to—” He gestured behind him. “Revasha’s lessons. She’s waiting.”

Lavellan excused himself, could still feel Solas’ eyes on him as he walked away. *Walked away.* Not fled. Never fled. That was— ridiculous. It was a dignified exit.

Lavellan had meant to stay at the Emerald Graves for only two more days, but he extended their stay for a week because of his lessons with Revasha, which took them to almost the end of the month. Almost the end of the year. He let out a breath. Five months since the Conclave.

Five months since the end of the world.

Well, they would have to leave soon regardless. Preparations for Halamshiral and all.

Bull and Dorian had spent some time with the Dalish too, mostly with the children, which had endeared them to the clan. Solas, on the other hand, had spent most of his time with the elders. At some point, the Hahren of the clan had let Solas take one class and Lavellan had warmed at how... happy Solas had seemed. At ease, at least. Teaching had always made him happy. Meanwhile, Cole had lingered around Anaria because of her struggles during the last leg of her pregnancy.

Lavellan sat at a nearby clearing after bathing at the stream, drying his hair. Dorian found him and sat beside him.

“So,” Dorian chirped, “we’re leaving tomorrow? Cutting it close, dear Inquisitor. Josephine will fuss if you aren’t there for the First Day festivities.”

Lavellan sensed a lurking presence. Revasha. So then, where could she be?

“Cutting it close has literally been my whole life,” he said, folded his towel.

He felt eyes on him.

“Quite,” said Dorian. “We had a thought of setting up early Inquisition presence. You say you plan to come back for the Freeman after the peace talks.”

“They’re further south, I think. Near the villas. We’re also waiting on Fairbanks.” Lavellan set his towel down and watched the trees. Would she climb? “I don’t like the idea of the Dalish being too close to the Freeman.”

He couldn’t sense her. Lavellan smiled to himself. Fast-learner.

Left foot heavy.

Well, still some ways to go.

“Excuse me,” Lavellan said to Dorian and stood, sidestepped just as Revasha roared and lunged at him from the bushes. Dorian shrieked and cursed in Tevene. She crashed on the ground in front of Lavellan and groaned in frustration, glared up at him as she stood, dusting herself off with a grumble. She smacked her braid out of her face.

“You got impatient,” he said. “Don’t undo all the work your patience has done. I know it’s easy to feel like you need to hurry but keep your pace. I wasn’t able to find you earlier.”

She pulled a twig out her braid and huffed. “Was it the left foot?”

“As always.”

“Urgh!” She kicked at the ground.

“Temper, [da’vherassan](#)^[3],” he reminded sternly. “Breathe. Count back from ten.”

Revasha still thought the technique stupid but she did it anyway after he’d threatened to walk out if she wouldn’t listen to him.

“You’re leaving soon?” she asked after she’d calmed down.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

“Will you be back within two months?”

Next month was Wintermarch, and they would spend most of it preparing for Halamshiral. The peace talks would be held the month after.

“Likely,” he said. “You have all that time. If I come back and see you still limp your elbow like a giant’s sagging scrotum, I’m making you repeat fifteen cycles of [Nirath'man](#)^[4] under a waterfall.”

“Twenty,” she challenged.

He raised a brow. “[Mar din](#)^[5].”

She grinned, wild and threatening. “[Vhalla palahnash^{\[6\]}](#), hahren.”

Lavellan was pretty sure she'd meant hahren as ‘old man’ more than ‘mentor’

“Go on,” he said. “That’s it for today. Say goodbye to me tomorrow before we leave or else I’ll cry on you.”

“Leave now,” she grumbled.

“You wound me.” He waved her off. “Go. Pass on what you learned to your fellow hunters. Teaching is the best way to learn.”

“Don’t die,” she said.

“Don’t plan to,” he returned.

Revasha shrugged one shoulder and walked off. Well, that was the most respectful she was going to get. When he turned back to Dorian, Solas and Bull had already arrived.

“Cole?” inquired Lavellan.

“With Anaria, as always,” said Solas. “The prospect of new life fascinates him.”

“Speaking of fascinating,” said Dorian. “You have a very unorthodox mentor-mentee relationship with your newest... protégé.”

“How?”

“It feels like you have to fight to get her attention, and even then, barely,” said Dorian and chuckled. “I thought she disliked you.”

“She’s like that with everything,” said Lavellan. “And it’s not that hard to get her to listen. You just need to match your bite to your bark and not baby her. Have the Inquisition scouts arrived?”

“First of them,” said Bull. “Met up with Harding. They’re near the stream, bit west of here.”

Lavellan nodded. He and Dorian went on ahead to the camp to share intel with Scout Harding while Bull and Solas stayed behind to present the crafting materials the Inquisition was offering as a gesture of peace to the Dalish. Lavellan had picked out the materials himself. The Dalish were still wary of him though, hence why Bull and Solas were the representatives so that the clan would trust the intention behind it.

It was comical. They trusted the Dread Wolf more than Lavellan. What a strange turn of events. He was sure Solas was having a secret laugh.

The Inquisition had set up at the remnants of an ancient elven fortress, though calling it that was generous. Only three walls were standing with their large arches, stones overgrown with ivy and vines, the roof long gone, exposing the interior to the elements. The forest had reclaimed the floor. Patches of wildflowers swayed in the breeze.

And in the middle was a large statue of a wolf.

Lavellan stared at its impassive face.

There were wolves everywhere in the Dales. Fascinating though. These wolves likely had roots as protectors, guardians, and he wouldn’t be surprised if in his early days, Fen’Harel had been more

of a protector than a trickster. No, not Fen'Harel. Solas. Solas was first. Fen'Harel was later.

Lavellan patted the wolf's snout, frowning at it.

Pulses of pain lanced through his head with every heartbeat.

"[Rajelan](#)^[7], it seems there's been a conflict of interest," says Felassan.

He frowns at Felassan, directs that frown to me, eyes like crystal and back as upright and rigid as a brittle arrow. His vallaslin is the same green as his magic.

"El'ras'amelan," greets he, voice more lyrical than I expect, like silk fluttering to the floor. "It is rare for one of your order to come into the light. What conflict of interest might there have been?"

He staggered back, blinked, that memory foggier than those that had preceded it.

Who...?

"Inquisitor!" Scout Harding greeted and Lavellan snapped out of it.

"Scout Harding," he returned. "What's the situation?"

They discussed the state of the Dales while Lavellan updated her on the Dalish and their information on the Freemen. After the talk, Lavellan roamed the crumbled fortress and inspected it, brushing his hand over the ancient stones.

Another pulsing headache.

Stone after stone, pushed into place by shaky hands, unaided by magic because their mana has been exhausted.

It will be beautiful once it's finished.

One slave lags behind. A lash on the back. It won't heal right no matter the manner of healing magic. It's meant to mark. Meant to mar the skin. June's vallaslin twists as they cry out in pain and our eyes lock, their hands reaching for me, pleading.

Dirthamen places his hand on my back and pulls me away.

"Come," he says. "You are better than them."

"Why?"

He smiles. "Because you are mine."

I smile back, his vallaslin on my face, down my neck, over my chest, stretching down to my hips. Golden and bright.

"I am yours," I swear.

Blood seeps into the stones. Later, they will wash it away with magic and it'll be like it never happened.

Lavellan drew his hand back as if he'd been burned. Nausea flipped his stomach, his chest tightening, a crawl of roiling disgust flickering over his skin. The stones in front of him were grey. Faded.

Bloodstained.

And he'd been complicit.

His hands fell on his face once more, tracing the vallaslin curving over his cheeks with trembling fingers.

Worse than that.

Lavellan had closed the fetters over his wrists himself.

Chapter End Notes

Dorian: I hate children

Five seconds later, makes lightning in a bottle for a child. Sure, Dorian. Sure. You're just as bad as Bull.

"The Dalish are so suspicious and mean and paranoid!!"

Nope, they're just trying to survive and they have to be extra careful because there's no shortage of idiots who wish to do them harm. Outsiders don't exactly have a good track record of being nice to them. They literally never got a break over the course of history.

(psst, hey, curious about what Lavellan's romance with Solas was like in the past timeline? Curious about what Lavellan was like when he was younger and actually got sleep? Well wonder no more! Get a glimpse for yourself -> [When the World Was Ours](#). It hits different, man, it just hits different).

Translation:

[1] **Da'lenen:** Children^[1]

[2] **Tundrast:** Gently^[1]

[3] **Da'vherassan:** Little tiger (lit. little arrow cat)^[1]

[4] **Nirath'man:** Water Dance – a type of Dalish fighting style for daggers^[1]

[5] **Mar din:** Your funeral (lit. your end)^[1]

[6] **Vhalla palahnash:** You're on (lit. accept challenge)^[1]

[7] **Rajelan:** Commander (a general term of address for leaders, doesn't matter what their rank is)^[1]

Fevered in your fervour

Chapter Notes

And we've broken the 200k word mark *toots kazoo*

Imma take a small moment to say I appreciate the people reading and enjoying this. Seeing your comments and reading your thoughts is always a highlight of the week :)) <3 Writing a big project like this is always in danger of feeling like a chore, but interacting with you guys is a really good motivator and keeps things fun and engaging.

tl;dr y'all are fantastic, thank you

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

sweeping golden in ardour—

“It always impresses me,” said Dorian.

Lavellan looked up from his conflicted stupor, had been sulking on the crumbled steps after having retrieved the fragments of his memories.

“What does?” Lavellan asked.

Dorian examined the ruined fortress. “What the ancient elves have accomplished. Even now, thousands of years later, you get a little glimpse. It must have been a sight to behold.” Sure, but at what cost? “Do you miss it?”

“Which?”

“The elven empire,” he said.

“I can’t miss what I never had,” he'd meant to say, but he did have it. Not that he remembered much of it. Still. “No,” he said instead.

Dorian blinked. “No?”

“If I am to miss anything about Elvhenan, it’s the fact that the elves had a home and their history is intact. But at the end of the day, it’s an empire.”

“That... Is that a bad thing?”

“There were no humans then. Only elves.” Lavellan stared at Dorian. “So then, who scrubbed the floors? Who built the palaces?”

His eyes shimmered with understanding. “Elves,” he concluded.

“Slaves,” corrected Lavellan. “No. I don’t miss Elvhenan. Not as it was.”

“To be fair, slaves then likely received better treatment than the alienage elves now.”

His fists clenched, heat rising in his chest. The skin around his vallaslin pulled, as if the ink had carved trenches into his flesh.

It was hilarious, truly hilarious, that he'd chosen Dirthamen's vallaslin again.

He wanted to puke.

"It's not about how they're treated," he said, struggled to keep his voice even and composed. "It's the principle of the matter. Slavery in and of itself is wrong, no matter what angle you tackle it. You take away their choice."

Dorian scowled. "Pray tell me then, did the elves and humans in the alienage and slums choose to be destitute and impoverished? There's no way out for them, but back home, a poor man can sell himself. Slaves can have positions of respect, comfort, support a family. It's true that some are treated poorly, but you can't possibly believe inescapable poverty to be better?"

"Positions of respect?" Lavellan spat. "You pit them against each other! You make them believe that there's a way out if they try hard enough even though the entire system is rigged against them! It's an illusion of a choice, Dorian."

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, but people are pitted against each other constantly in Tevinter," he spat right back. "It's kind of the culture, Inquisitor. No matter which echelon of society you belong to. It's why I want to change things."

"Why? So you can continue to have slaves but oh, good job, all good, they're comfortable, right?"

"I'm sorry, would you rather they die of starvation?" he asked, disbelieving. "So they can be *free*? You would prioritise your principles and ideals over the practicality of the situation? You would prefer it if people died but that's alright, they died free. They must be supremely happy about this." His grip on his staff tightened and his eyes sparked in fury. "You mustn't believe every story about Tevinter excess. Most slaves are treated well. Better, even, compared to some of your poorest. Abuse of power isn't uncommon, but it's hardly limited to Tevinter."

"I'm not saying one's better than the other!" Lavellan snapped, his volume raising. "Why is this an either-or situation? That's not the point I'm getting at. You relinquish personhood when you become a slave! Survival isn't all there is to life, Dorian. We're not simple animals, not pets to be leashed and detained and fed in regular interval just to be kept alive and working. You say it's better than poverty. *Why* is there poverty, Dorian? Why is slavery the next best solution instead of, I don't know, paying them for their labour?"

"You think I don't know how deep the systemic corruption within Tevinter runs?" He gritted his teeth. "Fasta vass, that's the whole reason I want things to change."

Change.

"Change?" Lavellan scoffed. "You really think things will change if you press on with that outlook? Sure it'll change. You'll change the colour of the fucking curtains instead of ripping the thing down."

"I am not trying to promote anarchy! What good will it do trying to heap chaos upon more chaos?"

"I'm not talking," he said through clenched teeth, "about your stupid government. I'm talking about the issue with believing slavery to be a perfectly alright thing to do to people. People. Notice me saying people, Dorian? Because guess what slavery does to them? It makes them objects! Things!"

His shoulders tensed. Everything in him was rigid, held tight, fit to erupt. His vallaslin burned.

“Poverty is shit, slavery is shit, and I’m not saying one is better than the other. But the thing with slavery is that you’re making living, breathing, *feeling* people into objects to be owned and sold and used. You can dress them up in silks, you can fill them up with food, you can show them all your golden walls. But know this.” He took a step closer, teeth gnashed and all but yelling, finger stabbing into Dorian’s chest. “They will feel their shackles. They will feel their chains. It will burn them from the inside. How many slaves does your family own Dorian?”

Dorian pursed his lips. Silent.

“How. Many?”

Then, softly, “I don’t know.”

“Do you even see them? Or do they flit past your vision as if they were ghosts? Had I been a slave, would you have noticed me?”

He stayed quiet.

The tightness in Lavellan tangled into a knot, clogged his throat, but he pushed through. His eyes burned. Wet. He blinked it away even as his lips twisted into an ugly snarl and fire fell from his tongue.

“People are not things,” he hissed. “*We* are not things.” He fisted his hands into the fabric of Dorian’s robes. “That is what slavery does. It erases who you are, who you could be. Nobody deserves to become property. Nobody deserves to be owned or ruled by anyone other than themselves.” He grabbed the string around Dorian’s neck and yanked out the carving, gripped it tight between his fingers and raised it between them. “I didn’t give you this so you can perpetuate a system meant to go nowhere. So you can change the curtains from blue to purple. So you can continue patting yourselves on the back for presenting people poison in a golden cup.”

Lavellan let it fall back against Dorian’s chest. Dorian said nothing, brows pulled, unable to look Lavellan in the eye. The whole area was quiet. They had drawn the eyes of the Inquisition scouts but he didn’t care. Let them hear it too.

“If our friendship truly means anything to you,” he said, hating the crack in his voice, “then I hope you have a long think about what I said. And if you still truly believe slavery is fine after all that...” Lavellan took a step back, gave him a broken look. “Then from now on, whenever you see me, I want you to envision shackles around my neck.”

Dorian’s eyes widened and the revulsion in his expression should have given Lavellan satisfaction.

It didn’t.

The silence was heavy. Even the forest seemed choked.

Lavellan’s vision blurred, the space between his brows aching from how scrunched they were to hold back his tears. Everyone stared. When he looked, they averted their gazes.

Solas and Bull had arrived. From the grim looks on their faces, they’d probably heard most of the argument. Humiliation brought a fresh bout of heat to Lavellan’s already flushed skin, the tips of his ears aflame. Humiliated because Solas was looking right at him as if Lavellan had torn Solas’ heart out and had forced him to eat it, and because Solas had actually fought to abolish slavery and Lavellan was the one who’d willingly walked into it and had ignored pleas for help.

The vallaslin burned on his face.

The vallaslin had long burned his face.

Lavellan tore his gaze away. He needed to get away from here. Away from all their stares and away from the fortress built by bloodied hands and torn nailbeds.

He rubbed any stray tears away and fled.

Lavellan found a wolf statue directly beneath the force of a waterfall, but the stone hadn't been worn away by the water, the statue remaining as immaculate as it'd been on the day it'd been carved. He walked towards the bank, toed off his boots, shed his coat and weapons, and waded into the waist-deep water.

He hoisted himself up onto the statue's base and leaned back against the wolf, hugging his knees to his chest. Whether it was meant to represent Fen'Harel or the wolves who'd stood with the Emerald Knights, it didn't matter. He felt safe with it.

The roar of the waterfall drowned out his own thoughts, cold water washing over his back and soaking his hair.

He stayed until his chest no longer felt constricted, until the vallaslin stopped burning.

The vallaslin.

Lavellan closed his eyes.

"We are the Dalish," he said, words lacing with the sound of roaring water, "walkers of the lonely path, keepers of the lost lore. We are the last of the Elvhenan."

He opened his eyes. Solas was standing in front of him, the water lapping around his waist. Vergala cawed nearby. She must have led Solas here. Clever Vergala, always looking out for Lavellan.

Lavellan kept his gaze steady on Solas as he said, "Never again shall we submit."

The rushing water filled the silence.

Solas looked at the wolf statue, asking a silent question. Lavellan smiled and leaned his head back against it, blinked away errant droplets of water.

"We're both outcasts apparently," he said with a wry smile, shrugged. "Or maybe they're the guardian wolves of the Emerald Knights. Either way... It felt safe."

"Lethallin," said Solas, so soft that it was almost overpowered by the falls, "come down. Let us get you dried and warm."

Lavellan stared at him, quiet.

Solas sighed and took a step closer, wading through the water as if it were nothing, and offered his hand.

“Please?” he asked, gaze and voice kind. Lavellan’s heart jumped. He suspected it would keep jumping even if it were dead because that was how stupid it was. As stupid as him because he took Solas’ hand.

From a stone wolf to the actual Wolf. Lavellan jumped into the stream, the cold water seeping through his clothes, droplets from his hair dripping down his back.

“Come,” said Solas and he guided Lavellan back to shore. There was a towel beside his coat and weapons. Solas placed the towel over Lavellan’s head and wrung out the excess water from his hair. Lavellan frowned.

“I can do it,” he said, grimaced at how raspy his voice was.

“You would scrub at it,” he grumbled. “I have seen how you dry your hair. You will damage it.”

“The bald man is judging how I dry my hair.” Lavellan had taken better care of it before, but he’d stopped seeing the point of it after he’d cut it short since the world was ending anyway. Or rather, he’d stopped caring.

He’d stopped caring about a lot of things.

“I was not always bald,” said Solas, careful as he dried Lavellan’s hair.

“Why did you shave it?”

“It was simpler to rid myself of it altogether,” he answered, but there was more to it, judging by the tone of his voice. But he didn’t elaborate.

“If you choose to grow it out again, can I braid it?” asked Lavellan.

Solas’ hands stilled, their warmth seeping into Lavellan’s cold skin. Sometimes, Solas would burn like a great hearth, and Lavellan would hold him tight as if he were burrowing deeper into that warmth.

Solas placed the towel around Lavellan’s shoulders. “If I choose to,” he said, rolling a strand of Lavellan’s hair between his fingers, a drop of water sliding down his wrist. “If you choose to grow yours out, may I braid it?”

“If I choose to,” Lavellan echoed.

It felt like a promise between them. He wasn’t sure what the promise was.

Solas let go of his hair. “How do you feel?” he asked, giving him a small smile. “It feels a little strange not being the one your ire is directed at.”

“I’m a little fresh out of ire for the moment, Solas. Terribly sorry, you’ll have to get in line.” The delivery fell flat. Lavellan sighed and wrapped the towel tighter around himself, wanting to burrow into something warm.

Solas is warm, whispered a small, hopeful voice at the back of his head.

Of course Solas was warm. He was a wildfire.

“What started it?” asked Solas. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

Lavellan could feel the stone under his hands, see the desperation in that slave’s eyes, Dirthamen’s

hand on his back searing through skin.

“Elvhenan,” he said, unable to meet Solas’ eyes. “Talked about empires. Slaves in empires. Then Dorian said slaves then were probably treated a whole lot better than the alienage elves now and I— I lost it, I guess.”

Solas said nothing. Lavellan shivered from the wet.

“Hold still,” said Solas and placed his hands on Lavellan’s arms. They glowed a soft green and the water that had soaked him lifted in droplets, suspended in the air and coalesced, then returned to the stream with a wave of Solas’ hand. Lavellan was now dry. And warm. “There,” he murmured.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, missed Solas’ heat once he retracted his hands. “How’s Dorian?”

“He has been quiet, sombre,” said Solas. “I believe you have given him something to think about. It... is not easy. Standing your ground against a friend.”

“Do we have to go back now?” Lavellan asked, a little petulantly if he was being honest. “I don’t think I’m up to facing anyone.” He rubbed his eyes. “I yelled in front of everyone. Gods, they were all staring.”

“It is difficult to tear one’s gaze away when you are swept up in the passion of your ideals.”

“I’d call it more choked up than swept up.”

“Because you care. That is not a fault, lethallin.”

“I just...” He pressed his lips. “I couldn’t let one of my friends think slavery was alright. I can’t. I can’t stand by it.” And yet, he had.

No, stop it, he admonished himself. That was the past. Something he could scarce even remember. Whatever happened then wasn’t something he could control now, and the best he could do was learn from it. So? Never be complicit ever again.

Never walk into fetters ever again.

“Never again,” he muttered to himself but Solas heard. His stare wandered over Lavellan’s face, heavy. “You’re looking at my vallaslin, aren’t you?”

Solas’ gaze focused on Lavellan’s eyes instead of roaming and tracing the curves of the stylised raven upon his face.

Lavellan gave him a sad smile. “I know what they truly mean. Slave markings.”

The silence stretched between them as if it were hide pulled out to be tanned. Lavellan watched the play of light on the ground dancing with the shifting of the canopies, squinted away from a ray of light falling upon his eyes.

“How did you find out?” Solas asked.

“Memory,” Lavellan lied. Or... well, he supposed it wouldn’t be a lie if it were memory rather than Memory. Because he did remember knowing of it.

He truly was learning from Solas.

“It burns, sometimes,” Lavellan admitted. “As if I can feel it carving through my skin.”

“I have a spell,” said Solas and it almost made Lavellan smile. Solas stepped closer, eyes shimmering with a flurry of emotions warring with one another, turned his eyes the colour of crystal grace petals when sunlight passed through it. “I can remove it. It will not burn. It cannot hurt you any longer.”

Lavellan stared at him, already knew his answer would remain unchanged.

“No,” he said and offered Solas a grateful smile.

“No?” Solas repeated incredulously. He reached for Lavellan’s face and cradled it, his frustration twisting his features into a broken snarl. “Why?” he all but hissed. “You deserve better than what these cruel marks represent. You—” He looked away as if it hurt, and it probably did. “[Ma gonas revas. Lasa em^{\[1\]}](#).”

And Lavellan kept smiling, though it turned sorrowful.

“Solas,” he murmured, “they are a part of my culture. If you take them... If you take them, then I lose what marks me as Dalish.”

“You lose what marks you a slave,” he snapped.

“In Elvhenan it meant that,” he said. Lavellan gently turned Solas’ head by his chin so their gazes would meet. “Now it means another thing.”

“That you are all fools?” he asked, expression pained.

“Rebellion,” Lavellan said.

Solas scowled. “Enlighten me.”

“Meanings can change over time. For the Dalish, they fought to preserve their culture. Tell me, you who has seen Elvhenan in memories, how accurate are the vallaslin?”

Solas kept frowning, but he considered it, at least.

“Almost perfect replicas,” he said. Though spat seemed more apt.

“They survived. Through hundreds of years of persecution and erasure, they survived.”

“You will have to forgive me if I do not rejoice at the fact that slave markings are one of the few legacies of Elvhenan to survive over the years.”

“I don’t expect you to rejoice. You won’t understand.” Solas opened his mouth but Lavellan tapped his fingers against Solas’ lips and smiled at the resulting affronted look. “It’s alright that you don’t. It wasn’t meant to insult, lethallin. Simply, we fought to keep this. It’s ours now. Whatever cruelty they meant, we’ve given it a new meaning. Endurance, rebellion. We looked at time and said, ‘You will not erase us this day.’”

He held the hands cradling his face, gave Solas an intent look.

“I won’t erase it. I won’t run from it. I’m going to dismantle the very foundations it once stood on and I’m planting a new flag on the rubble and I’ll be wearing the vallaslin. The biggest fuck you in the history of fuck yous.”

“You wish to abolish slavery?” Solas asked, blinking in genuine bewilderment, before his

expression softened. "Coming from anyone else, I would have scoffed. But you... You have already shaken the world. I do not doubt that you can do it again."

His throat dried. He hadn't expected that.

"Not just that," murmured Lavellan. He looked back out into the Graves, burned the serenity of it into his mind.

He'd been given this second life. Second chance. There was an idea he'd always considered, had turned it over in his head, but had never given it voice or thought and then he simply hadn't had the time because of the threat Solas had posed. But perhaps, if he gave it thought and voice... It would be something to strive for after all the world-ending stuff was taken care of, somehow. A dream for himself, for those who would come after him, and for those who had come before him.

"I want to give the Dales back to the elves," he said, low and dark with promise, glanced at Solas. "I will give them back Arlathan Forest."

He made a soft, unbelieving noise. "That is certainly a large promise. I believe Andraste and Shartan attempted that with the elves and the Dales. It all unfolded out poorly."

"I know. Which is why Orlais has to change." Lavellan let his hands fall off Solas'.

"And how would you go about doing that, exactly?"

"Briala," he said. "I'm going to give her the throne."

His declaration struck Solas speechless and he retracted his hands from Lavellan's face.

"You would put such trust in her?" asked Solas. "No, I get ahead of myself. *How* do you plan do that?"

"It's one thing to rule an empire. But who truly rules it? The sovereign or the one who has their ear? Depending on how the night goes, I'll make sure she either has Celene's ear or the leash to Gaspard's neck."

Lavellan was leaning more towards giving her Gaspard's leash, essentially placing her on the throne, but there were some disadvantages with that path. First off, the leash must be strong. Gaspard despised the Game but he'd still grown up playing it, still knew how to navigate it, and while his usual move was to barrel through everything with a sword, he could be cunning when needed. Briala would be walking a knife's edge the entire time.

With Celene... There was terrible history between them. Lavellan couldn't, in good conscience, ask Briala to stay with the lover who'd murdered her parents and had burned down the Halamshiral slums just to prove a point.

But he couldn't ignore Celene's contributions either. Minimal movements with making things better for the elves was better than the negative movements Gaspard would have wrought.

Solas turned away with a soft scoff. "And Tevinter?"

"There's a magister named Maevaris Tilani. She has the ear of the Magisterium, and the Inquisition has given her the resources she needs to stay on top of the backstabbers. Dorian too. If he truly comes around the whole 'slavery is actually pretty terrible' idea, which I think he will, we can help him change Tevinter."

He gave Lavellan a peculiar look. “We?”

Lavellan froze. Oh.

“My apologies, I— I just—” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, I presumed. You...” He turned away from Solas so he wouldn’t see his expression twist. “You probably have plans to leave. Once this is all over.”

What was he saying? *We*? As if it was guaranteed that Solas would stay? As if Solas would stand down? Why would he? To him, he had a duty, an obligation to help the elves the only way he knew how and Lavellan understood that. Hated that he did. But he did regardless. The same desire to help was driving them, and yet...

Could Lavellan be blamed for still foolishly, unlearningly, holding on to that sliver of a chance in the horizon? That one day, perhaps he and Solas could walk the same path without sacrifice?

But everything had a sacrifice.

“I did have plans to leave once Corypheus has been taken care off,” he said slowly. “But perhaps... Perhaps I could be convinced. To stay.”

Lavellan’s heart and breath stuttered, the swell of hope tentative upon the shores. He looked at Solas, jaw slightly slack. Solas wouldn’t look at him, instead staring at the wolf statue with a troubled expression.

“But what you plan will not be easy,” murmured Solas. “It is a tall order, and it would require precise manoeuvring. How would you go about it? How would you ensure that the elves will not lose Arlathan as they’ve lost the Dales? How would you ensure that your attempts to help will not decay once you are gone?”

He wrung his fingers, heart hollow. *Don’t make me hope. I tire of it being crushed.* “I can’t claim that I think everything will go smoothly. That I have everything under control and everything thought of. I don’t. And I’m still mostly focused on stopping Corypheus, but if we’re successful... We can help them. I know we can help. We’ll take things one step at a time, as they are.” He gave Solas a hesitant look. “It would be easier if I had a certain elven mage with me, someone to help me hash the details out and argue with me, which would help show the problems in the plans.”

“You would welcome my arguing?”

“Maybe,” he teased. “Yelling at you is very therapeutic.”

He smiled. “You are terrible, lethallin.”

Lavellan snorted. “It’s a distant plan for now.” His expression hardened. “For now.”

The Emerald Graves stirred with the soft wind, as if the spirits of those who’d had their final stand here approved of his intentions. Or that could just be his imagination. Solas was still staring at him.

“It will not be easy,” said Solas.

“No. And neither is this whole ‘stop Corypheus from trampling all over the world just so he could rule over old Tevinter’ business. But we’re managing.” He placed his hand on Solas’ arm, offered a warm smile. “I know you don’t consider us as your people.” Solas pursed his lips. “And I know you don’t exactly hold us in high regard, but I hope you will consider it.”

“What of the city elves?” he asked.

“I did say ‘us’.”

Solas considered him. “You consider the city elves your people too?”

“I do. I don't hold the belief that they've turned their back on elven culture. They did what they had to so they could survive, and the Dalish are doing what they're doing to survive too. But it's time, I think, that we did more than just surviving day to day.”

“You wish to restore the elves?”

“Not restore. Fix the imbalance. Someone has to keep fighting for them. I want to give them a home where they're not marginalised and afraid. I want to give them a safe and stable future. Where they can retrieve and learn from the past in safety so they can both guard it and rebuild themselves.”

“It could fall,” said Solas. “The home you build them. It could fall.”

“Inevitably. Nothing stays the same forever, but if I've learned anything, it's that someone will always rise to help. I'll do my part. And one day, when I die, I'll leave the future in somebody else's hands.”

Frustration twisted his lips, try as Solas might to hide it. “How can you be certain that they will not twist your legacy? Your caring nature is an exception, not the rule. Not everybody has your selflessness, your agency, or your compassion!” His eyes glimmered with something broken. “I cannot watch you build a glorious future only to watch it fall because of uncaring hands. Will not.”

“Solas,” he murmured, slid his hand down Solas' arm to capture his hand. Warm and calloused. He gripped it. “Things that are built always fall at some point. But someone like us will always come along. Someone who strives towards a better world. Change is possible.”

“You are too idealistic.”

“You are too fatalistic.”

Solas huffed out a scornful laugh. “Opposing ends of the spectrum.”

“No. Counterweights. Balance. Which is why I'd like you with me when I do this. You pull me back before I burn myself in my idiocy, I pull your head out of your brooding ass.”

“I do not brood,” Solas muttered.

“You sulk.”

“No.”

“Mokey, droopy elf.”

“Please stop.”

“Overdramatic, broody, sulking, mokey, droopy elf.”

“Ass.”

Lavellan gasped, drew his hand back in mock offence. “Solas!”

“Reckless, obstinate, troublemaking, problematic, self-immolating *ass*.”

“Solas, you’ll make me swoon.”

They stared at one another.

Lavellan burst out laughing and Solas allowed himself a few chuckles. The vallaslin no longer burned. Nothing but a ghost.

The whisper of a new promise.

Here in the land of the Dirthavaren, he made a new promise. He would give the elves a place to call theirs, if they wished to settle, so that if some Dalish chose to remain nomadic, at least the choice was theirs instead of it being a necessity for survival.

Hope was such a rare thing to feel.

Lavellan cherished it.

“Please consider my offer,” said Lavellan. “Please. I know it’s too much to pin your hopes on but... Let me try.”

And Solas — weary, proud, sorrowful Solas — said, “I will think on it.”

Lavellan knew that was the best he would get for now and resolved to keep trying.

Never again would they submit.

Dorian and Lavellan hadn’t spoken to each other since the argument yesterday. That was fine. They both needed time.

The Dalish said their goodbyes with the promise to meet again. Cole waved goodbye to Anaria’s swollen belly and the children wailed over Iron Bull leaving while he desperately placated them. Attempted. He wasn’t succeeding. It was... quite a sight.

Revasha approached him, grumpy as always, but she seemed softer today.

“Don’t miss me too much,” he joked.

“As if,” she scoffed, scuffed her shoe on the soil. “Dareth shiral, hahren,” she mumbled. The hahren sounded genuinely respectful, this time. And worried.

Lavellan paused strapping the saddle on for a breath, then turned and smiled reassuringly at Revasha.

“Be safe,” he said. “I’ll return in two months.”

“I’ll kick your ass when you come back.”

“We’ll see.”

She huffed and walked back to her clan, but Lavellan didn’t miss the small smile on her lips. He

smiled and resisted rolling his eyes.

“Where’s Solas?” Lavellan asked.

“Talking to the old people. Said he’d catch up,” said Bull and he chuckled. “Yeah, of course he’d hang out with old people.”

“Solas is an old person at heart,” said Lavellan.

“I detest that,” joined a new voice. Lavellan grinned at Solas.

“You’re just an old person then?” His eyes fell on the small, somewhat crooked stick in Solas’ hand. About the length of his forearm, almost the width of his wrist. Solas had tied the wolves around it. “What’ve you got there?”

Solas held the stick out and channelled his magic into it. The green flooded into the spaces and the stick elongated, the tip of it splitting into three strands which loosely coiled around one another. The green light flooded into that space between the coils. Solas let it rest on the ground and leaned against it, smiling smugly.

It was a staff.

“What the hell, it grows?” asked Bull. “Where’d you get that?”

“Some of the trees here are ancient, perhaps standing since millenias past when magic was rife and bountiful. I happened upon the branch of one such tree. It remains responsive to magic and conducts it well. The malleability of it enables me to change its length as I desire.”

“Any other sticks you can change the length of?” Bull asked, waggled his brows. “If you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” said Solas. “Though there is nothing we can do about your unfortunate circumstance.”

Bull guffawed. A few birds flew from the sudden noise. “Solas, was that a joke?”

“He jokes a lot,” said Lavellan. “Unfortunately, most of his humour is too high-brow for us so it flies over our sad, little heads.”

Solas shrunk the staff and fastened it to his belt, his lips pressed into an unamused line.

“Hey now,” said Bull. “My head’s not sad. Or little.”

“Which head are we talking about?”

“Wanna find out?”

“I’m good,” said Lavellan. “I’d like to keep walking, if you don’t mind.”

“Not being able to walk the next day’s half the fun.”

“I think there’s a difference between walking funny and not being able to get up.”

Bull grinned. “Don’t like it rough?”

“I like it rough just fine.” Lavellan waved him off and turned to his horse, pretended he didn’t notice Solas stumbling behind him. He swung himself up onto the saddle. “Don’t exactly want to

break my spine riding Qunari cock though.”

“Inquisitor!” Solas admonished.

“What? I don’t.”

“There are children,” he hissed.

“Think of the children!” cried Bull but his laughter ruined any sincerity in the sentiment.

Lavellan did scan the area for any Dalish children still lingering, but there were no children.

“No children around, lethallin,” he said and grinned. “Or are you the child?”

Solas slapped the flank of Lavellan’s horse and it dashed forward. Lavellan’s yelp and Bull’s laughter echoed in the forest.

“You’re late!” Josephine scolded the moment he alighted at Skyhold.

“Wha— First Day isn’t until tomorrow,” he protested, couldn’t even get off his horse fully before she dragged him away by the back of his coat.

“*Tomorrow?*” she asked, almost shrieking. “Inquisitor, do you even have your commemoration speech prepared?”

He sent his friends a pleading look but Bull just cheerfully waved at him and Solas seemed suddenly riveted by the colour of the sky, which had been the same fucking colour for weeks because they were in the middle of the gods-damned winter.

“You are absolutely filthy!” said Josephine. “Go get washed, quickly. I cannot *believe*—”

Anyway, Josephine had nothing to worry about. Lavellan nailed his commemoration speech.

Now here he was being drank under the table by Bull and Blackwall.

That was unimportant.

He woke up the next morning with a pounding headache on the rafters of the Great Hall in nothing but his trousers. Someone had drawn all over his chest and arms.

Sera.

Lavellan groaned.

That was also unimportant.

His clan was safe, thank whatever deity was out there. For now.

“So Duke Antoine ended up dying trying to defend the Keeper from his own nobles,” he muttered. “I’m sorry, that’s a little hard to believe?”

“It could have been accidental, taken to look as if he died in defence of her,” said Josephine. “Whatever the cause, he can no longer pose a problem.”

“He had Venatori agents so we need to keep an eye on them,” said Lavellan. “The nobles have fled for now, but they’re still mad and spreading lies and rumours. How typical.”

“The elves are safe, momentarily,” said Josephine with a soft sigh. “That is the best we can hope for.”

“For now,” agreed Cullen. “We’re lying in wait. Those nobles are bound to return.”

Still, Lavellan allowed himself a relieved breath, grateful that he’d listened to Solas. Sometimes, when he wasn’t trying to end the world, he had good ideas.

After discussing the events at the Exalted Plains and the Freemen problem as well as the numerous operations demanding their attention on the map, they finally got around to the preparations for Halamshiral.

“Grand Duke Gaspard wants us to appear united, as a proper organisation,” said Josephine. “As you know, Inquisitor, militaristic forces cannot wear masks for such events. He has also sent us the designs for the military uniforms that we are to wear.”

His mood soured. Oh, *those* ugly things.

Josephine took out the large scrolls and unrolled them, revealing the designs for the military uniforms. They looked sharp and formal but All-Mother's mercy, the colours were *hideous*.

He made a face. As did Leliana. Josephine did her best to be polite but Lavellan held no such reservations.

“What,” he said, “the fuck is that?”

“It’s... very red,” agreed Cullen. “And blue.”

“I believe he is trying to combine Fereldan and Orlesian colours as we belong to neither,” said Josephine. “We are, literally speaking, situated in the middle. The divide between the two kingdoms.” Josephine pursed her lips. “It’s... charming.”

“It’s fucking ugly,” said Lavellan.

“Inquisitor, we must wear this. It would be an insult to the Grand Duke otherwise.”

“You mistake me for someone who cares about his feelings.” He rerolled the scrolls. “Fine, we’ll wear the uniform, but he doesn’t get to decide our colours. Tell me, what colour is our banner?”

The three advisors looked at each other, then the Inquisition banner on the wall.

“Black,” Lavellan said. “We’ll figure out accent colours later.” He took the scrolls with him.

“Where are you taking those?” Cullen asked.

Lavellan’s eyes glinted. “Madame Vivienne.”

“Absolutely not,” she said, lips curling in affront.

“Thank you!” he sighed.

“This will not do. Come.” She took the designs and swept into the rotunda. Solas looked up from his couch, reading another book, expression pulling tight at Vivienne’s appearance. She unrolled the scrolls on the table. “Dorian, darling!” she called out. Lavellan tensed.

Dorian peered over the library’s railings, made brief eye contact with Lavellan, but the two looked away just as quick.

“Come down,” she ordered.

Well, there was no denying her when she was using that tone. Unless you were Sera or Solas. Unstoppable force met immovable object. He wasn’t sure who was which.

Dorian shuffled into the rotunda with false cheer. “You require my dashing presence?”

“I require one with his sanity and wits about him.” She tapped a manicured finger on the displayed plans. “They wish for us to wear these uniforms to the ball.”

Dorian took one look at it, then grimaced as if he’d stumbled into a blood magic ritual which required an orgy of no less than sixty people.

Yeah, Lavellan still wasn’t over that.

“What is *that*?” Dorian asked.

“Grand Duke Gaspard trying to control the Inquisition,” said Lavellan. “In his own way. He’s telling us how to present ourselves, purposefully choosing those colours to alienate us because we belong to neither Ferelden nor Orlais, and because it is just. So. Ugly.”

“I had not taken you for an arbiter of fashion,” said Solas behind him.

Lavellan scowled. “I’m not usually, but I know when I’m being played.”

“If you throw the dress code away, he might take it as an insult,” said Dorian, still not quite meeting Lavellan’s eyes.

“Which is why we won’t. The military uniform itself is a good idea. We are the Inquisition; we must appear as a unified organisation. Those colours can go rot in the Void for all I care though. We’ll appear in his uniform, but we’ll appear in our own colours. He can’t control us as he expects to.”

Gaspard’s little manoeuvre had been lost on Lavellan the first time since he’d just been relieved to receive an invitation. Now? No. Gaspard would bend to *them*, not the other way around.

"I believe we can also add a few embellishments, little modifications," agreed Vivienne, an approving spark in her eyes at his statement. "Nothing drastic. We can hardly show up underdressed."

"So which colours?" asked Dorian.

"Black, of course," said Lavellan. "That's the colour of our banner and no country has it as its dominant colour. Besides, Orlais loves colour. We would ultimately look more formidable in black."

"I suspect we'd look quite dreary if show up in pure black," said Dorian.

"Not sure which accent colours to use. Keep it simple. Green...?"

Vivienne made a face. No, perhaps not. Green and black was Tevinter.

"White? Classic?" suggested Dorian.

"This is a royal masquerade, not a geriatric assembly," said Vivienne. "Perhaps red."

Lavellan felt a presence behind him. He turned and Solas was there, peering at the designs.

"Gold," Solas said.

Dorian and Vivienne looked at him.

"Gold?" asked Dorian, then paused, considering it. "Actually, that's not such a terrible idea. Black and gold. Elegant."

Vivienne appraised Solas. "Darling, far be it for me to comment on your... *rustic* ensemble, but are you certain this is a conversation you can contribute to?"

Solas huffed in slight scorn. "Enchanter, my *rustic ensemble* does not detract from my objective ability to determine complementary colours." And his frescoes surrounded them as a testament to that, its masterful execution unable to be denied, and everybody in this room knew it. "The Inquisitor wishes to appear as a formidable yet unified force? Black is perfect. He wishes to insert his small rebellion?" He glanced at Lavellan, eyes glinting. "Gold will suffice."

"Do illuminate us on this decision," Vivienne said.

He tilted his head as if he couldn't quite believe she hadn't gotten it yet. Vivienne's gaze turned cold.

"Gold is the colour of kings, wealth, prestige. Gold demands attention. It is why you've garbed him in it, Enchanter."

Vivienne stayed quiet, narrowed her eyes. Lavellan looked down at his golden uniform.

"But often, you appreciate the brightest objects in the dark," said Solas. "They are most luminous in it."

Lavellan blinked at him. Solas kept his gaze on the designs.

"I see," said Vivienne and it was heavy with meaning. Lavellan couldn't be sure what. She and Solas seemed to be having their own separate conversation. "Loathe as I am to admit it, black and gold number among the few sound suggestions he has had."

“Such high praises, Enchanter,” said Solas dryly.

“I have a seamstress in Val Royeaux. She is the best in her field. Allow me to discuss with her the arrangements for the uniforms. I believe we can come up with something befitting of the Inquisition and of the Inquisitor.”

“Nothing too ornate,” Lavellan said. “We’re still a political and military group.”

“Although you have been dipping your hand heavily into espionage as of late,” remarked Dorian. “The rookery is always teeming with life.”

“Some children need nudges,” he muttered. “Hidden nudges.”

Vivienne rerolled the scrolls and tucked them under her arm.

“Thank you, Vivienne,” he said. “If you could also discuss with the seamstress if it’s possible to ensure the uniforms can be used practically? I suspect there’ll be fighting if we’re facing assassins.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said, gaze flicking once more towards Solas, then walked out of the rotunda, her heels clicking on the stone.

“Well,” said Dorian, gesturing behind him awkwardly, “I must be getting back to my book. Riveting read.” He shuffled up the stairs to the library as if he was headed for the stocks. Lavellan frowned.

Solas returned to his book.

Lavellan propped himself up on the table and squinted at Solas.

Eventually, Solas sighed and looked up at him. “Is there anything else you require of me, Inquisitor?”

“Why gold?” he asked.

“I believe I already gave my reasons.”

“I think you just implied I’m obnoxiously bright in this uniform.”

Solas smiled. “Occasionally. Although, I retained low expectations seeing as it was Vivienne who’d suggested it. It does cut for a nice figure, I suppose. That, I would give her.”

Lavellan’s lips twitched. “A nice figure?” he teased.

“An objective truth,” said Solas.

“Uh huh,” he said, smile widening. “Of course. And if this colour so hurt your eyes, why suggest it for black?”

“As I said. Too much is an indulgence. A tasteful amount is elegant. Your garb should befit and declare the grace with which you move and fight.”

“Ah, and now you suggest I’m graceful?”

“It was no suggestion,” said Solas, gaze sharp yet ghostly on Lavellan’s skin, lingering yet flitting. Lavellan gripped the table edge. “It was a *declaration*. It was never up for debate.”

Lavellan's breath caught, the tip of his ears flushing.

A slow smile pulled at Solas' lips, playful yet serious, incongruous with the humble apostate image he'd cultivated.

"It would also match the colour of your eyes."

Chapter End Notes

Literally Dorian could not have picked a better time to bring up slavery. Bit of an emotional roller coaster, this chapter. I've seen both arguments on whether to remove the vallaslin or not, and honestly, they're both valid. Really depends on the Inquisitor's personality/priorities.

(I don't actually dislike the Winter Palace uniforms as much as Lavellan does bahaha. I actually really dig the red.)

Anyway, that wraps things up in the Dales (for now; they'll be back). Halamshiral looms ever closer. Oh man, oh man. I'm excited. Wicked Eyes was one of my favourite quests! Although a lot of people also hated it for the same reasons I loved it pfhaha.

Bonus:

[POV: You're Solas and the love of your life just declared he's going to give the elves a home and all you taste are ashes on your tongue and your heart in your throat because this is all. Your. Fault. And you want to let him try, gods you want to let him try, you want to hope, you want him to succeed, but in the end what will it amount to when he's dead and gone? How does it feel knowing you're cradling something bright and warm in your hands but it isn't eternal and that is because of YOU. Someone this brilliant can never shine as bright as he could, as he should, because of YOU. YOU will kill him. YOU are already killing him.

(You have already killed him)]

Translation:

[1] **Ma gonas revas. Lasa em:** You deserve freedom. Allow me. [\[↑\]](#)

Lips shape forgotten prayers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

vespers on your tongue—

“Thank you for your time, Comte Dumaine,” said Lavellan and offered his hand, hoped that they wouldn’t notice the crescents his nails had dug into his palms during the excruciating meeting. They shook hands.

“House Dumaine stands with you, Inquisition,” said Comte Dumaine and left.

Once the door to Josephine’s office closed, he massaged his sore neck.

“You know,” he said, “at some point during that meeting, I wished Corypheus would come and end my pain.”

Josephine grimaced into her board. “As painful as it was, it has solidified the last of the alliances we require for Halamshiral. They should prove most helpful in ensuring that the damaging gossip and false rumours do not destroy your standing before the ball starts.”

“Sublime,” he said flatly.

Leliana smiled. “Cheer up, Inquisitor. That was our last meeting. No more Orlesian dignitaries to tolerate, for the time being.”

“My neck is stiff,” he grumbled.

“Ah, that reminds me.” She reached into her pockets and gave him a key. He took and frowned at it. “A key to the private bath in the bathhouse, accessible only via the Keep,” she explained. “For the lord of the castle. You are the closest to a lord, I suppose. Ever since the baths opened, everyone has gone to indulge. You should try it.”

“You can have it. I doubt I’d go.”

She stared back at him, made no move to take it.

“Ah,” he said. “That was a command.”

Leliana’s smile widened. “I wouldn’t presume to give the Inquisitor orders.”

“But Leliana would presume to give Mahanon orders?”

Her smile brightened. “Orders? My, such a strong word. I am merely *advising* you. After all, I am an advisor, and what a terrible advisor I would be if I do not ensure our Inquisitor is receiving the care he requires.”

He glanced at the door. “It’s locked, isn’t it?”

“That would imply I am holding you hostage.”

Josephine sighed. “The door is not locked.”

A click.

“Now it’s not,” he said.

“Leliana!” Josephine admonished.

“Who even locked it?” Lavellan asked, laughing.

“It must have been the wind,” said Leliana. “We must be careful. The winds are so powerful that they can turn locks. The winds also wish for the Inquisitor to try the baths.”

Josephine shot Leliana an exasperated look, but it morphed into a gentle smile once she turned to him. “I share Leliana’s sentiments. Please try to relax. I know the preparations haven’t given you much time to rest.

No kidding. The Halamshiral preparations had been a flurry of activity. Everything in him was exhausted, down to his marrows, but his stress had left him unable to succumb to exhaustion, his thoughts always screaming in the night as he'd glared up at his ceiling. The Well had even agitated one night and had told *him* to be quiet for a change.

“Alright,” he said. “Fine. Maybe I’ll try it.” He doubted he would but if it meant Josephine and Leliana would release him, what was a little white lie?

The door remained untouched by the *wind* as Lavellan returned to his quarters.

He sighed as he closed the door and ascended the stairs, grimaced as he massaged the stiff muscles of his shoulders. Creators, everything in him was tense. Lavellan eyed the stack of paperwork waiting for him at his desk and grumbled. No rest for the wicked.

“Maybe I don’t want to be wicked,” he muttered and sat.

His gaze fell on the wooden tiger beside the inkwell. A piece he'd recently finished. Lavellan smiled and picked it up, turned it in his hands as he scrutinised the details. Would Revasha like it? He wouldn’t be offended if she threw it away. Maybe he’d make a collection and scatter it around her aravel to annoy her.

He placed the tiger down and reached for the coffee he'd prepared earlier. Pathetically cold now, but he still sipped at it as he picked up the first paper on the file, grimaced at the block of writing staring him in the face.

Someone knocked. *Please don’t be more paperwork.*

“Inquisitor? It’s Solas.”

Lavellan set the coffee down in defeat. Alas. “Come in.”

Solas ascended the stairs and entered the room. Lavellan squinted at the letter he was reading and threw it down petulantly, rubbing his eyes.

“Not that I dislike you, Solas, but your presence this past week has always indicated more paperwork.”

His lips twitched. “I apologise. I do not enjoy it any more than you do.” He appraised Lavellan. “You do not look well.”

“That obvious?” he asked. “I just came back from a meeting with House Dumaine. Do you know

how long I sat smiling and being polite, waiting for the part where I would give *at least* a quarter of a shit?" He stood and paced, arms gesticulating. "It never came. A ninety-year-old impotent man would have had better luck coming than the moment where I would *give a shit*."

Lavellan collapsed back into his seat and shook the letter he'd been reading at Solas.

"And I'm convinced it would kill Lord Iguierro to say what he means without extending it to three paragraphs! A darkspawn would skewer him through the chest with a sword and instead of dying like a normal person, he'd monologue first!"

"Ah," said Solas, smiling. "Death to pontificators."

A helpless laugh bubbled out of him. "You know, a lot of weird things have happened to me ever since I got this job, but it's almost par for the course, right? Walk out of the Fade? Peanuts. Stop a mad fossil from ending the world? Sure, why not? Be praised as the prophet of a god you don't even believe in? Shit's already weird enough so this may as well happen. But you know what they don't warn you about?" He slammed his hand on the stack of paperwork and bared his teeth. "*This!* At least you can kill demons and ancient darkspawn magisters if you stab them hard enough. This? Not so much."

"You can always burn it. You have a suitable fireplace."

Lavellan rubbed a hand down his face. "Believe me," he muttered into his palm, "I almost did."

"Shall I return another time?" He motioned at the papers he was carrying. "Before you decide to throw me over the balcony."

"Why bother when I can just push you down the stairs?"

"Murder is on the agenda now?"

"It wouldn't be murder. It'd be an accident."

Solas laughed and passed him the papers. "These are Alexius' reports."

"Put them in this pile," he said and gestured at the sad pile with about five pages in it.

"What is it?"

"Ones I actually enjoyed reading. You won't get accidentally pushed down the stairs any time soon."

Solas was still smiling as he placed the reports down. "How relieving. I have also passed on the glyphs to Cillian to be investigated."

Lavellan murmured his gratitude and reached for his cold cup of coffee. Before he could take a sip, Solas took it from him and left Lavellan staring at his now empty hands.

Solas examined the drink. "This is already cold."

"It matches my wretched mood. Can I please have it back?"

He stared at Lavellan. "How much sleep have you gotten the past week?"

"Take a guess." Lavellan gestured at his face. "Look at this very handsome face and take a wild guess."

Solas set the cup down. "Have you tried the baths?"

"Not you too," he sighed, massaged his shoulders. "Leliana gave me the key so I can access the private bath but I haven't had time." The baths had opened in his past life too, but he'd never used them. No sleeping issues then, either.

Being well-rested must have been so nice. However that had felt.

"As you are fond of saying," said Solas, "it is not a matter of getting time, rather, a matter of making time."

"Are you seriously using my own words against me?"

"I am reminding you since you never listen to your own sound advice. Come, I can show you how to operate them." He held out an inviting hand. Lavellan's pulse spiked for a splinter of a second but he brought it to heel. "The paper will not go anywhere."

"Unfortunately."

Nevertheless, his desperation for rest had deprived him of his rational thinking so he let Solas lead him out of the room and through the Keep to the private bath. A few servants acknowledged them as they passed.

They stopped at and opened a door carved with ornate patterns of hanging leaves, and entered the narrow corridor beyond. Solas lit the torches as they passed. Upon reaching the room, he waved his hand and the braziers and candles flared to life.

Lavellan whistled. A circular pool with steps easing into it greeted them, though it was devoid of water for the moment. The wall beside it boasted a mural of a craggy mountain range and the night sky, while a section of the room was reserved for seating arrangements. Cabinets lined the wall opposite the mural.

He considered the small pedestal by the edge of the bath, a wolf statue atop it. A spout protruded from the pedestal over the pool. For the water, maybe?

Solas followed his gaze. "Does it bother you?" he asked.

"No," he answered and wandered into the room. He marvelled at the mural, brushing tentative fingers over it as he passed, peered into the small archway at the back of the room. It led into a washroom. He looked back at Solas.

"Go wash yourself," said Solas, fiddling with something at the base of the wolf pedestal. "I will prepare the bath."

Lavellan frowned. "I'll help you."

"No, I brought you here to take some time off for tonight. Allow me to handle things. There should be robes and soap in the washroom."

Lavellan hesitated, but acceded and entered, acutely aware of the one-wall barrier between him and Solas as he undressed.

He yanked on the chain by the wall and let the water rushing from the overhead spout hit his face.

Lavellan walked out wearing the bathrobe afterwards, the fabric itself already thin, sheer from the

waist-up. He resisted hugging himself. There was no reason for self-consciousness. It was just Solas. It was fine. This was fine.

Steaming water poured from the pedestal spout into the pool.

“The water is drawn from a natural underground source,” Solas explained over the gushing water, “and cycled back through a system of filters. It should be familiar to those who have experience with Tevinter plumbing.”

Lavellan sat at the edge of the bath and admired the tiled mosaic. “Is this another case of Tevinter copying elven constructs?”

“Imperfectly,” said Solas with a small, smug smile. “They could not accomplish self-heating water.”

Once filled, Solas stopped the water and Lavellan stepped in, the water reaching to his hips. He sat on the small ledge by the side. The water climbed to his chest. Warmth seeped into exhausted muscles and he leaned against the wall with a sigh.

“Warm enough?” asked Solas.

He hummed, tipped his head back and smiled languidly at Solas through half-lidded eyes. “Thank you, lethallin.”

Solas smiled back, though it seemed strained. “I will ask someone to check on you later. For now, relax. You have certainly earned it.”

Lavellan’s heart raced. *No, don’t leave me alone with myself—*

“You’re not staying?” he asked.

Solas hesitated. “I do not wish to impose,” he said, carefully selecting his words. Lavellan sat straighter and gestured at the waters with an inviting sweep of his hand, hoped the casual gesture masked his true unease.

“The bath is big enough for two. And you know I won’t do any relaxing in the quiet.”

“True enough,” he said with a short huff. He glanced at the door, the bath, then frowned. Lavellan pushed further.

“You need a break too,” he said. “Stay. Keep me company?” It was one thing to be left alone while preoccupied with tasks, another matter entirely to stay in the quiet where his own head would be his undoing.

Solas stared, assessing. “If you are sure.” Although he was the one who sounded uncertain.

“I am,” he affirmed.

“Very well.”

Lavellan almost slumped in relief. Solas walked into the shower and the sound of rushing water followed.

One-wall barrier.

Lavellan submerged himself up to his nose with a scowl.

In hindsight, maybe this was a terrible idea.

The warmth coaxed the tension out of his muscles at least. He closed his eyes.

Whispers stirred beneath the sound of rushing water.

Ras'virelan, the Well said. [*Syn ma eolasem? Ar'angelir na.*](#)^[1]

His eyes snapped open just as the soft splash of water echoed in the room. Solas settled himself on the opposite side of the bath and released a small, contented sigh. Lavellan pushed himself up so the water wouldn't cover his mouth.

"Nice, right?" he asked, banishing thoughts of the Well and Ras'virelan from his mind. Not now.

"I had forgotten the immediate relief that such a comforting warmth gave," Solas murmured, eyes closed.

"You're welcome."

He opened his eyes, unimpressed. "I am the one who suggested this."

"I'm the one who suggested you stay."

"Then let us both congratulate one another for the splendid contribution."

Lavellan chuckled, leaned his head back once more, tilted it so he could appreciate the mural on the wall. All the constellations were present, hidden amidst the deep and gorgeous gradient of navies and dark purples of the sky. Faint sweeps of white hinted at clouds. The rich colours couldn't have come from the ground pigments they had now. He almost expected the stars to wink and move.

"Did you paint this?" asked Lavellan.

"Yes," said Solas, though he never specified when he'd found the time to do so and Lavellan never asked.

"Beautiful as always."

He looked down, fighting back a smile. "You flatter me."

"I'm being honest."

The quiet drifted between them, comfortable.

"I can paint something else, if you'd like," offered Solas.

Lavellan looked at him. "What, on this wall?"

"A scenery reminiscent of the Emerald Graves since you enjoyed the forest." Solas' gaze traced over the mural, methodically gleaming, as if he could see it in his mind's eye already.

"No," said Lavellan. "It's got all the constellations. Also, the colours are so rich and— Well, it's fine. Leave it." He smiled softly at it. How long had Solas agonised over this? These had been his baths first. He must have wanted something nice to look at. "I like it," he murmured.

"Thank you," Solas returned, just as quiet.

Lavellan tipped his head forward and sank deeper once more, let his eyes fall shut. This was nice. He better not fall asleep though, lest he drown. Embarrassing way to go.

Maybe he could finally sleep tonight. They had an early War Council tomorrow and they were going to call on the remaining nine invites since Gaspard allowed, at most, twelve key Inquisition members for the invitation, discounting the Inquisitor.

Of course, he would push it to the maximum amount.

They also needed to call the rest of the inner circle and examine the map of the Winter Palace that Sera had received from her Friends. There were also letters he still needed to finish. At least they'd already ensured the alliances they needed to boost their reputation and counter any damaging gossip. It would be hard enough navigating the ball as a Dalish. If he could control the field before the game and *the* Game began—

“You are frowning.”

Lavellan opened his eyes, blinked at Solas with a small, “Huh?”

“This is not enough to calm you, is it?”

He chewed on his lip. “No. Mind’s still racing.”

“How can I help?” asked Solas.

Lavellan smiled wryly. “Do you have a spell that can turn my thoughts off? Just for a while so I can have pure, blissful, quiet.”

It was a jest but Solas appeared to be considering it. He rose and stepped out of the bath. Was he leaving?

No, he merely opened the cabinets against the wall and rummaged through them. Bottles clinked.

Lavellan watched him in curiosity at first, but his gaze began to wander. The fabric of the robes from the waist-up was all but transparent, clinging to Solas’ skin with every movement like a jealous lover, hanging off the hard line of his shoulders. Rivulets of water travelled down his calves.

“Ah,” said Solas and Lavellan averted his gaze. Solas procured three, small vials and approached, knelt and presented the colourful vials to Lavellan.

“What are they?” Lavellan asked.

“Fragrant oils. Choose which scent you’d prefer. We can also forego them if you wish.” He uncapped one and waved it beneath Lavellan’s nose. Sweet, heady, too heavy. The second was mildly floral, too sharp. The third was full, but not suffocating. Comforting, even.

“That one,” he chose and Solas smiled. Lavellan peered up at him, kept his gaze on Solas’ face and stopped it from wandering. “Which would you have chosen?”

“The same.”

Solas retrieved a strange lamp and placed it atop one of the small brazier brackets against the wall, poured the oil into it.

“What’s it for?” Lavellan asked.

"To diffuse the scent." He placed the vials back and closed the cabinet with an unreadable expression. "As for not thinking..." He looked at Lavellan with another considering expression, the glow of the braziers casting him in gold, shadows sharpening the angles of his face.

Lavellan stared back, had meant to ask what he was thinking, but he couldn't speak.

Solas approached and slipped back into the bath. This time, right beside Lavellan.

"Turn," Solas ordered.

"Why?" he asked, tongue feeling heavy.

"I am going to give you a massage."

You're going to what—?

His brain floated uselessly in his head and all he could do was keep staring. They were close now. Lavellan need only shift his right arm forward to touch him.

"Are you sure?" Lavellan asked. "I don't want to trouble you."

"It is no trouble," he reassured.

Lavellan was an adult, he could do this.

He stood and moved to a part of the bath without the ledge and presented his back to Solas.

The cool edge of the wall pressed just below his sternum, the water level receding to his waist once more. Solas' gentle fingers peeled his robes down, touches ghosting over bare skin as the fabric fell. Lavellan pulled his arms from the sleeves and leaned his elbows on the bath edge. Solas rested his hands on Lavellan's shoulders, the droplets of water from his fingertips sliding down and over Lavellan's collarbones. Lavellan shivered. From the cold. It was from the cold.

"Hm," said Solas.

"What?"

"Lethallin... I believe I may be holding stone rather than muscle."

That startled a laugh out of him. "Hey! Drawing a bow is hard work and so are flailing daggers around."

"There is a great difference between toned and knotted." Solas rubbed circles into the muscle of his shoulders and Lavellan hissed at the dull roll of pain. Solas adjusted the pressure accordingly until the pain became bearable. Soon, the motions turned more soothing than hurting. His head tipped forward.

The cold faded, chased away by the press of sure fingers.

Solas muttered.

"What?" asked Lavellan.

"You are strung tighter than a harp string stretched to its limits."

He laughed again. "Begging your pardon, Solas. Haven't exactly had time to ask someone for a

massage and it's not as if it was at the forefront of my concerns either."

"You shouldn't have to ask. You should be lavished with offers to help you for all the help you have provided. Given luxuries."

"Dorian said something similar. Something along the lines of me being handfed grapes?" He chuckled, turned into a sigh when Solas worked at a knot beside his shoulder blades. "Besides," he murmured, "you know that's not the kind of person I am."

"I know," he murmured back. "I know."

Solas swapped fingers for the heel of his palm and pressed into and up the muscle beside Lavellan's spine. He braced one hand against Lavellan's shoulders so he could press deeper and Lavellan grinned at his grumbling.

"Having trouble?" he teased.

"Your back is as stubborn as its owner," Solas muttered.

He laughed. Solas pressed too hard and sent Lavellan lurching, elbows slipping over the patch of water beneath his arms. He laughed harder.

"Stop laughing. Your shoulders are shaking— Stop *moving*."

"Stop making me laugh then!"

Lavellan pushed himself back up, turned and met Solas' unimpressed face. He poked the corner of Solas' lips.

"You're smiling," said Lavellan.

The corners of Solas' lips twitched but he grabbed Lavellan by the shoulders to turn him back around.

"I saw that smile," Lavellan sang.

"Perhaps the exhaustion has addled your head."

"You know what? I wouldn't be surprised if it has."

Solas returned to his soothing ministrations, still fighting with the muscle, but as time passed, the muscle yielded. Lavellan relaxed.

"Better," said Solas.

The fragrant oil threaded with the steam, settled and softened the air into a hazy, aromatic screen.

"Are you still thinking?" asked Solas.

"I—" Solas worked at another knot of muscle and Lavellan's thoughts winked out of existence. Well, there was the answer.

They stayed arrested in the quiet, masterful hands on his back coaxing him into surrender. He lost track of where Solas' hands were, focused only on its presence, trailing heat as they roamed and pressed and warmed the expanse of his back.

Lavellan closed his eyes, tipped his head further forward, hummed in approval as Solas finished unknotting the muscle. The fragrance turned heavy. Steam with his every breath.

Quiet.

Too thick, too much to fill, too many dangerous thoughts and yet none at all.

“Do you have memories of these baths?” he asked to distract himself, voice more dazed than he'd like.

“Yes,” Solas whispered. His voice was closer. If Lavellan leaned back, he was sure Solas would be there, chest pressed to back. Warm. Could turn his head and curl his fingers around Solas' neck and pull him in and—

“Tell me?” Lavellan asked.

Solas was quiet again. Too many things to go wrong in the quiet.

Memories of heat and hands and breaths and teeth — usually swept aside and ignored by him — now lurked with the threat of descent upon his rattled defences. Unhappy about being disregarded for so long.

“Back in the time of Elvhenan,” Solas began, voice like falling silk, “there walked a proud, tempestuous man, who thought he knew the world and all it offered.” Lavellan frowned but tilted his head to show his attentiveness. “He'd lost his faith for trust and love, knew that to love was to be betrayed, and so, he kept this castle cold and vacant.”

Ah, gearing for self-deprecation tonight, was he?

“He sounds lonely,” Lavellan murmured.

“Do you think so?”

“Lost faith tells me that he first loved without reserve.”

Solas said nothing in response, instead splayed his fingers over Lavellan's back. They trailed up, left a path of heat which lingered and seeped into soaked skin.

Fucking hell. This was a mistake. Lavellan wasn't walking out of here alive.

“Who was this elf?” Lavellan asked, expected Solas to wave it all off as some knowledge lost to time or attribute it to the Fade.

“Fen'Harel.”

Lavellan's head snapped up and he stared at Solas in bewilderment. Solas remained aloof. Although, something sharp lingered behind Solas' eyes, steely in the dim of the room, flickering with something alive and waiting. All of that focused solely on Lavellan.

“You're not joking,” Lavellan concluded, his pulse knocking against the thin barrier of his skin.

Solas smiled. Too sharp.

“No.” He turned Lavellan by the shoulders again, clutching a little too tight.

“Why let us stay in his castle?” Lavellan asked.

“Who is to say?” he said and Lavellan refrained from huffing. Oh, so *now* he was evading.

His irritation dissipated with another skilful press of Solas’ fingers. He cursed. Solas chuckled, the timbre full and deep and rumbling.

“I have another story,” said Solas.

Lavellan took a few seconds to reassemble his coherency.

“Truth or fiction?” he asked.

“Fiction.” Solas paused. “Although it could be construed as truth. All stories, even those made to entertain, are truthful once you see yourself within them.”

“Go ahead then,” Lavellan said, unable to mock the vague answer.

“Since we are on the subject of Fen’Harel...” He rubbed small circles into Lavellan’s back. “Have you heard of the tale of The Clever Star?”

He perused through the catalogue of his memories and frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“There once was a hunter,” Solas said, “who wielded a bow of glinting sunlight, and a sword of silver starlight.” His voice adopted its lyrical quality, enrapturing, gripping Lavellan’s attention as if it were the wolf’s teeth resting on the skin of his neck. “A hunter of great renown, who had befriended the denizens of the forest, had fostered peace between the hawk and hare, had charmed the snakes so that they would never bite him, had danced with the halla, had walked with the bears. He beloved the forest as it beloved him. They called him the Star for he was bright as he walked among them.”

Solas’ hands lowered, kneaded the muscles of Lavellan’s lower back. Lavellan was certain he had no knotted muscles left. Not after being subjected to such thorough attentions.

“He was most renowned, however, for his cunning mind.” Hence the title. “He would lay such beautiful traps in the forest, tempting those who would seek to do it harm. His traps would close upon intruders and they would welcome it. Legends of this beautiful trap spread. What manner of trap would be so welcomed, so enjoyed, even at the price of death?”

Solas rested his hands on Lavellan’s hips, pressing and rubbing calming circles with his thumb, teasing at the boundary where Lavellan’s robes were hugging his waist. Lavellan breathed in steam and fragrance.

“This legend reached the ears of the Dread Wolf. Against his better judgement, the legend of these beautiful traps and the cunning hunter had intrigued him into seeking them. But the forest dissuaded him. The bears chased him, the hawk and hare misled him, the snakes struck from the undergrowth, the halla blocked the path.” With each deterrence, Solas dug his fingers into Lavellan’s skin as if imparting Fen’Harel’s frustration, writing it upon his back in strokes of fire.

Lavellan could lean against him. The temptation was there. If he succumbed, he knew Solas would follow, could tell his story in sweeping whispers across Lavellan’s lips, murmur his tales against Lavellan’s heated skin.

He minded his shallowing breaths, deepened them, leashed his heart and fastened it to his ribs.

“The hunter received word of Fen’Harel’s arrival, already knew what it was he’d come for.”

The water shifted. The heat and voice behind him seemed closer.

“However, he was just as proud as the Wolf, had tasted victories innumerable times and had bored as a result. Fen’Harel would be a challenge to overcome, he was sure.” He dug the heel of his palms into Lavellan’s already pliant back and pushed up, slow. Lavellan either cursed or sighed or said nothing at all.

“Challenging the Dread Wolf?” Lavellan asked, voice as scattered as the steam drifting around them. “Brave or foolish?”

“The two often overlap,” said Solas with a soft chuckle and Lavellan snorted. Wasn’t that the truth? “That night, the hunter laid his traps, the simple and the beautiful alike, then journeyed to the edge of the forest where the Wolf was lurking and searching for ways inside.” Another pause. His hands were back on Lavellan’s shoulders, following the slope of them.

Lavellan frowned. Solas had been pausing after every segment.

The realisation kicked him in the teeth. Solas was constructing it in the moment.

The Dread Wolf is spinning you a story.

“‘I have lain my traps, simple and beautiful alike,’ said the hunter. ‘I challenge you to a hunt of wiles. When you catch me, you will know the answer to your question.’ And Fen’Harel, never one to decline challenges of such a nature, accepted. On the condition that the forest will help neither.”

Faint laughter drifted into the room from those in the communal baths the next few walls over.

“Thus, it began. The forest was the hunter’s domain. Even if the forest were to remain neutral, he knew it so intimately as if it were a part of himself. He misled the Dread Wolf, taunted him by coming close and darting past before the Wolf’s teeth could close around his throat. The hunter laughed, mad and drunk from the moonlight and the chase.” His hands rested on the curve where shoulders met neck and gently worked on the muscles there. Lavellan bunched his shoulders and yelped at the crawling sensation.

Solas laughed. “Ticklish?”

Lavellan grumbled and rubbed his nape. “No,” he lied. “Just... sensitive.”

“Ah, of course. Such a difference that makes, truly.”

“Ass.” It wasn’t as venomous as it could have been and they both knew it. Solas turned him around again, hand firm on his nape.

“Do you wish to hear the rest of the story or not?” asked Solas.

Lavellan’s face warmed, breath stuck in his chest, too aware of the weight and grip of Solas’ hand. “Fine.”

Though Solas had teased earlier, he let go and steered clear of Lavellan’s neck.

“Where was I? Ah, yes. The hunter’s tactics irritated Fen’Harel, and yet he has not had such *fun*—” he dug the heel of his palm into a sensitive part of Lavellan’s back and Lavellan choked on a breath, mouth falling open from his silent noise of surprise— “in centuries. Fen’Harel avoided the traps, learned the hunter’s misdirection, and laid traps of his own by mimicking the sounds of animals in need for he knew the hunter’s kind heart would compel him to investigate. The hunter

caught on and retaliated by leaving his golden arrows in hidden spaces as false trails. Their chase and game of deceit and guile continued well into the night.”

Lavellan’s mind spun, both enraptured and yet unable to concentrate on the story, too focused on Solas’ touches, the pull of skin on skin, the slow track of droplets over his back.

“Fen’Harel knew it would not be enough to mimic the calls of the injured animals, and so he shifted into the injured animals himself and approached the hunter. The hunter would help, cautious at first, and Fen’Harel would later return as another injured animal. Eventually, the hunter mistakenly believed Fen’Harel was hurting the creatures of the forest. One final time, Fen’Harel shifted into an injured halla; the hunter’s most beloved animal. By now, the hunter approached without hesitation, cursing Fen’Harel with every furious step.”

He heard the smile in Solas’ voice, the delight of one close to its prey.

“And Fen’Harel returned to his true and terrible form, answered his curses with a too-wide smile.” Solas once again pressed a large and broad stroke down and up the muscles beside Lavellan’s spine, struck so deep with a pleasant ache that Lavellan’s back arched, stomach pressing against the smooth wall of the bath. He was left boneless and strung all at once.

He was going to die. Solas was going to fucking kill him twice.

“Fen’Harel leapt,” murmured Solas, “and fell upon the hunter.”

Lavellan’s throat and mouth stayed dry no matter how many times he swallowed. He asked, breaths shaky, “How does it end?”

“Some say the hunter escaped,” he said and Lavellan hung onto every word, welcomed the slow slide of it like honey down his throat. Solas’ hands rested and seared on his hips. “Others say...”

His warm breaths fanned over the side of Lavellan’s neck, the hint of moving lips tracing over the shell of his ear, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Others say: that night, the Dread Wolf feasted on a star.”

His heart broke free from its leash and drum, drum, drummed. Reverberated in the chamber of his chest.

“Are you sure that’s how it ends?” challenged Lavellan, almost a whisper, aware of every centimetre of space remaining between them.

“Is it not?”

“The hunter claimed that Fen’Harel would have his answer *when*, not *if*, he found a way to snare and catch the hunter,” he said. “This means it was deliberate so that the trick the Dread Wolf sought would end up being his hidden yet sure downfall. I know what makes the traps compelling.”

“Oh?” His breaths ghosted over Lavellan’s ear. “What felled him?”

Lavellan turned his head, locked gazes with Solas, who was much, *much* closer than he’d anticipated. Lavellan’s gaze lowered, unable to hold the eye contact.

“The illusion of victory,” he whispered in the scant space.

Something tense stretched between them, a rope pulled taut, close to snapping. Lavellan could snap it. Cut it. Surge forward and pull Solas close, pull towards an impending fall. It wouldn't take much.

Not much at all.

"So who truly won?" Solas asked. Made no move forward or back.

"Neither, both," he meant to reply, but a yawn interrupted him. He blinked once it passed.

And just like that, the tense atmosphere between them dissipated like fine mist beneath the scorch of a summer sun. Lavellan almost punched the wall. Why did it take so much to build and so little to crumble?

...Did he even want it built?

Don't fool yourself. You know the answer.

Solas laughed softly though it trembled at the edges as he stepped back.

"Ah, splendid. It worked," he said.

"Beg pardon?" Lavellan grumbled, irritated.

"You fall asleep easier when told a story," said Solas. The distance between them grew, and try as Solas might to hide it, desire and regret in equal measure flickered in his eyes. "Let us get you back to your quarters. Before the water turns cold."

Lavellan pulled his robes back over his shoulders and slipped his arms through, felt wrung and loose. Still, despite his disappointment, he couldn't deny the exhaustion turning his lids and movements heavy.

The two of them dressed and dried in utter silence. The silence continued all the way back to his quarters.

Once Lavellan stepped foot inside, he turned to Solas, who was standing before the door, refusing to cross the threshold.

Another uncertain quiet lingered between them.

If Lavellan invited Solas in, he would enter. One word from him and Solas would follow and kiss him until the world disappeared. One word. Not even. A tip of his head, one meaningful look, and they could stop dancing on the precipice they'd built and stranded themselves on.

But the words to leave his lips were not, "Come in." Rather, "Goodnight, Solas."

Solas bowed his head slightly. When his head raised, his gaze pinned Lavellan.

"Pleasant dreams, Inquisitor."

Inquisitor. Formal.

Lavellan closed the door, eye contact holding until the door clicked shut. There was a pause before he heard Solas leave, footsteps fading.

The seconds passed. The silence dragged.

Lavellan leaned his forehead against the door, trembling, aching.

“Fenedhis,” he hissed, pushed himself off and rubbed his face as he made his way to his bed, eyed it. Well, Solas had done it. He'd quelled Lavellan's thoughts. Completely replaced them with something else.

He collapsed on his bed, didn't bother going beneath the covers. Lavellan let out a small yell of frustration and buried his face in his pillow, turned his head because he couldn't breathe, and glared at an unremarkable patch on the wall.

Still, his entire body had relaxed from the bath and massage. Without his meaning to, his eyes slipped shut.

His bow glimmered golden in his hand, silver sword hanging from his waist.

Lavellan stood in the clearing, breaths fogging with every exhale as he stared up at the blood-orange moon. The back of his neck prickled. Someone watched him, hungry, waiting, curious. They prowled the border of the clearing, never left the shadows of the forest.

This seemed familiar. Where had he heard of a golden bow and silver sword before?

Sweetness in the air and water on his skin.

[Ve na^{\[2\]}](#), whispered the Well.

Lavellan turned, nocked a sunlit arrow, and drew the bow. Fluid, swift. Deadly.

A shadow shifted in the trees.

Red eyes gleamed. Six.

He tilted his head in clear challenge and loosed the arrow, laughed as it tore through the air in a cutting line of sunlight. It missed, but no matter. Hitting wasn't the point.

The red eyes narrowed and a growl shook the air.

“[Imara em, Fen'Harel](#),”^[3] Lavellan taunted, resplendent in his thrill. “Or are you frightened?”

“[Din, vun'lin. Ane na?](#)”^[4]

Lavellan nocked another arrow as his answer. “Come find out.”

Fen'Harel laughed and the trees shivered from the sound, canopies bending and bowing in deference, but Lavellan stood his ground even as the shadows grew. Even as the night sky darkened to near black and the stars hummed. Even as the stars swallowed the moon and the moon swallowed them back. Locked in a pyrrhic dance.

“Do you recall what I said last time?” asked the Dread Wolf. Lavellan stayed quiet, tracked Fen'Harel's movements with his eyes, draw steady. “The next time we hunt?”

Lavellan grinned, too much teeth.

“You think you can hunt *me*?” asked Lavellan. “Should I flee from a man who will not even step out from his shadows?”

“These are not mine; they are yours,” he said and gave another of his rumbling laughs. The grass cowered. “I am in your dream, after all.”

“No nightmares for you to devour here.”

“Perhaps another thing entirely to devour here.”

Lavellan lowered his bow, smiling a secret, playful smile.

“You get ahead of yourself, [fen’lin^{\[5\]}](#),” he said and Fen’Harel growled at the nickname. “Very well. If they’re truly my shadows—” He cast his hand out and dispelled the mist of darkness devouring the dream like a leeching poison. The shadows fled with a soft exhale. Blood-orange moonlight turned silver and *there* stood Fen’Harel, a hulking lupine beast.

The Dread Wolf sighed but it was absent of true exasperation. His six eyes squinted, amused.

“This is hardly fair,” said Lavellan, appraising the large wolf. “You’ve four legs and I only have two. You’ll cover a greater distance than I.”

“A hunt is rarely ever fair, vun’lin.”

“Ah, so you’re saying you need an advantage because you can’t catch me otherwise?” His eyes narrowed in mirth. “I understand. Alright, I’ll grant you that mercy.”

Fen’Harel stared. Lavellan waited, smile widening.

“Very well,” Fen’Harel acquiesced and the darkness he was draped in cascaded off his form, collapsing into amorphous shadows which gathered, coalesced, and compacted into an elfin shape. The writhing shadows spilled and covered Fen’Harel like a cloak, curved over his head and hinted at a wolf’s head, covering the upper half his face.

He grinned back at Lavellan, teeth flashing in the moonlight.

“There,” he said and his words echoed, layers upon layers of tones obscuring yet amplifying his true voice. “Two legs. Just like you.”

The shadows twisted around Fen’Harel, the fabric of the Fade bending to his will, bending from his power.

“Should we be doing this?” Lavellan asked. “I don’t fancy surprises from demons.”

“If I were you, vun’lin, I would worry about other things.”

“Such as running from *you*?” He scoffed. “I don’t fear you.”

“I am aware.” Fen’Harel stalked forward. That was the only way to describe it. It was no walk; it was a prowl, movements sinuous and focused. “No matter. I will instil it in you.”

“You can certainly try.”

Fen’Harel cocked his head, shadows alive.

Even if Lavellan couldn’t see his eyes, he could still feel Fen’Harel’s gaze flitting over his skin like

a fine brush of lightning.

Fen'Harel took another step forward. Lavellan cursed himself for taking one back.

Something in him stirred and recognised the danger, brought all of his senses on alert, focused on every incremental movement Fen'Harel was making. Everything about Fen'Harel was shifting, dripping danger.

Lavellan coiled tight, muscles ready.

Fen'Harel smiled.

“Run,” he bid.

Lavellan ran.

He leapt into the safety of the trees and called his mist of shadows back. It descended upon the forest and the moon bled once more, warring with the stars which hummed in unison with his heart. Beat, beat, running from the Wolf.

His blood burned bright through his veins as he tore through the forest, the light from his bow and sword cutting through the darkness, turned him into a moving target. Lavellan nocked a golden arrow as he ran and loosed it randomly, let its trailing light mislead.

The move seemed familiar. Where had he heard it before?

His shadows protected and blanketed and guided him. They would alert him to where the Wolf was, his presence tugging at the fringes of Lavellan's awareness.

Lavellan cackled and ran towards the Wolf.

He scaled a tree and waited, watched as Fen'Harel came tearing through, his cloak of shadows thicker than Lavellan's, which was more fog than true darkness.

Lavellan shot an arrow at him and let it miss. It landed by Fen'Harel's feet.

Fen'Harel's shadows reached for him but he was already gone.

“[Shem'el, shem'el, fen'lin!](#)” Lavellan taunted into the forest. “[Ma felas.](#)”^[6]

“[Juithir,](#)”^[7] answered Fen'Harel, the croon of his voice seemingly coming from just behind his ear. Lavellan turned and slashed with his sword. Nobody there.

The uncertainty and apprehension crept in, quickened his heartbeat, turned him frantic and uneasy and—

And alive.

The energy of the Fade shimmered, wove with the darkness, ghosted over the back of his arms.

Lavellan laughed as he sprinted. Feral, fiendish, and free. Everything within him sang. Here in the fog of his shadows, tearing through the forest like a wild little thing beneath the war hymns of ancient stars.

His ragged breaths shuddered against the walls of his lungs.

Alive.

The Wolf was behind him.

Lavellan dodged and his airy laughter chimed as Fen'Harel's shadow darted past and missed him. Fen'Harel slunk back. Clever eyes among the trees watched Lavellan leave, biding time.

[“Josa, vun’lin. Junoran na.”](#)^[8]

“Ass,” Lavellan muttered.

Just to be annoying, Lavellan shot arrows into the sky as he ran.

Gold rained.

Somewhere, the Dread Wolf grumbled.

He wasn't certain how long they continued this dance of shadow and light for, how long they ran in pursuit of one another, how long Lavellan jolted at every shadow that wasn't his, how long he gleamed and sparked and shivered under the force of his exhilaration.

But soon, no matter where he ran, the Wolf's eyes would follow him. No matter where he hid. No matter where he waited.

A hungry gaze lingered on his back.

Lavellan entered another clearing, but he remained safe in his shadows. He stood still, discerned where Fen'Harel could possibly be, but his shadows gave him nothing. No presence.

His shoulders tensed. No presence at all. There was nothing here but him and his too loud, too fast breaths.

No, that couldn't be right.

It was much too late when he realised that the shadows surrounding him were thicker. Too caught up in his thrill, in how the chase had electrified his nerves, to realise that these were no longer his shadows of mist. Little by little, Fen'Harel's shadows had crept in. He'd waited until the shadows Lavellan had thought were his had become entirely Fen'Harel's.

A chuckle echoed behind him, around him.

“Figured it out, have you?” The voice was by Lavellan's ear, teasing the shell of it.

The shadows solidified behind him, warm. Familiar. Where from?

Lavellan tried to escape but Fen'Harel wrapped his arms around him and held him flush against his chest. Lavellan squirmed.

“Hush, vun’lin. I've caught you.”

Fen'Harel trailed his hand down Lavellan's arm and eased the bow away. It dematerialised under his touch. As did the sword.

The moon devoured the stars.

Lavellan's rapid breaths echoed in the clearing and he growled at Fen'Harel. “How long?” he

asked.

He hummed, his shadows curving around Lavellan. “Who is to say? Just know that it was not your shadows which were alerting you to my presence, but rather, mine.”

“Why?” he hissed.

“Why? To make you complacent of course.” His arms tightened around Lavellan and one hand settled over Lavellan’s chest, over his thundering heart. The warmth of his touch seeped past the thin fabric of Lavellan’s tunic. “Besides, it was wondrous seeing you so... electrified.”

“Clever,” Lavellan praised begrudgingly. He turned his head and saw only the lower half of Fen’Harel’s face. The rest: shadows. Shadows which were curling around Lavellan’s legs and sides. This close to him, Lavellan could sense how the Fade was pulling around him. “For a coward hiding behind me and his shadows, at least.”

Fen’Harel tensed at his provocation. His fingers dug into the spaces of Lavellan’s ribs.

“Is that so?” he asked and turned Lavellan so they could face one another. The faint shadow of a wolf was still stretching over his head, still hiding the upper half of his face. His arms locked around Lavellan’s waist again, pulled him close, chest to chest. Could he feel the knock of Lavellan’s heart?

“It is so,” said Lavellan. “And so you’ve caught me. Must be extremely anticlimactic for you.”

“On the contrary,” he said. The energy around him shivered from his delight, skittered over Lavellan’s skin.

“So? What happens now?”

“Do you really not recall?”

“Recall what?” he asked. “That this entire chase mirrored one of your tales? I’m aware.” Lavellan paused. “How... do you know about that? Solas—” His voice died.

The recollection of the baths and the warmth and the haze and the unspoken things returned, and now here Solas was as Fen’Harel, finally touching Lavellan but not quite. Always did things in the world of dreams that he was unable to in the waking world.

“Solas made it up on the spot,” Lavellan finished softly. *For me.*

“It is my castle, vun’lin,” said Fen’Harel. Smooth recovery. “I have ears in every wall.”

“Ah yes,” said Lavellan dryly, “will you answer if I call out your name when I touch myself at night?”

“I just might.”

“Well don’t. You’ll probably disappoint me.”

Fen’Harel leaned close. “I wonder, vun’lin,” he murmured, “if your tongue tastes as silver as it sounds.”

Lavellan’s breath caught. He looked up at Fen’Harel but couldn’t find his eyes beneath the shadows. Lavellan frowned, reached for it. Fen’Harel flinched back but Lavellan gripped it tight, the shadows shivering beneath his hand, shifting to look as if it was snarling and Lavellan snarled

back.

“I am wild in my dreams, Wolf,” said Lavellan. “You do not scare me.”

Fen'Harel bared his teeth. “Mahanon,” he warned, a growl lacing within it. Lavellan ignored the trill of heat it sent trickling down his spine.

“I want to see your eyes,” he said and the admission stunned Fen'Harel into silence. Lavellan used that chance to peel the shadows away, muttering as he did because it was fighting to remain. Thick and viscous beneath his hand.

But slowly, slowly... He eased it away.

The shadows receded.

Electric, crystalline eyes stared back and Lavellan's breath left him, caught in its intensity. Fen'Harel's face settled yet slipped. He saw it, he knew he did, but the Fade twisted in such a way that any attempts to catalogue or remember it scattered his focus and so he had to content himself with seeing it as it was: a solid, real thing beneath his hand. He cupped Fen'Harel's cheeks, traced curious fingers over the planes of his face.

“I can't remember it,” said Lavellan. “You're still hiding.”

Sorrow lingered in his eyes. It was the only thing which stayed static and so, Lavellan kept his focus on them, saw Solas within. Lavellan swept his fingers beneath those eyes.

“It is better this way,” said Fen'Harel.

“You look so sad,” said Lavellan. Fen'Harel said nothing, merely watched Lavellan. “Do you still have no faith in love and its many forms? Do you still not trust it?”

Unimaginable sorrow twisted his expression. He raised one hand, tentatively placed it upon Lavellan's cheek. Warm. The stars above them opposed the moon.

“No,” said Fen'Harel.

“No what?”

“No.”

Lavellan's hands trailed down from his face, passed over the flutter of his pulse on his neck, settled on his chest.

Fen'Harel leaned closer. As if he couldn't quite stop himself.

Lavellan should move away.

Should.

The hand on Lavellan's cheek reached further, tangled in his hair and gripped, pulled gentle and careful and tipped Lavellan's head back. Their gazes met. Lavellan bit his lip so no noise or shuddering exhales would escape.

Closer, closer. The distance between them lessened, charging with heat and lightning.

Fen'Harel's other hand settled on the small of Lavellan's back.

“Say no,” Fen’Harel whispered, almost pleading, their breaths mingling.

Lavellan’s heartbeats rallied against his ribs, his hands fisting in the material of Fen’Harel’s shirt.

“Say no,” he said, head tilting, lips hovering.

Lavellan could do it. One word. One word and this would stop and they would avoid a terrible, overcomplicated mess. Fen’Harel was Solas and Solas was Fen’Harel. It wouldn’t do either of them good to separate the two.

“Say no,” he pleaded once more and Lavellan’s eyes closed.

They had both lost.

The rope snapped. The distance closed.

Their lips met, fierce and hungry and all-consuming and Lavellan almost buckled from the force of him.

The longing and ache seared and spilled into the heat of their mouths and the rolling press of their bodies, the desperate wanderings of their hands. Lavellan’s heart thrummed like a war drum. Dizzied by the taste of power and wildness and lightning and ancient sins and fuck, fuck, fuck, he shouldn’t have missed this. Shouldn’t have—

The fingers in Lavellan’s hair fisted and pulled harder. Lavellan broke the kiss with a stray gasp but Fen’Harel chased his lips as a man parched in the desert would a mirage of water.

How did the story end? The Dread Wolf feasted on a star?

Lavellan bit Fen’Harel’s bottom lip, hard enough to tease the skin into breaking, pushed until they fell to the forest floor. He straddled Fen’Harel, blood and heat sliding over their tongues, vicious.

Fen’Harel gripped Lavellan’s hips, fingers digging into yielding skin, pushed Lavellan onto his back. Hands clawed, fingers curled. Fen’Harel’s lips and teeth brushed against his neck. Lavellan tipped his head back with a shuddering breath, bared more of his neck, moaned at the warring celestial bodies, fingertips sore from how hard he’d clawed at Fen’Harel’s back.

Fen’Harel cursed at the sound, lips drawing venerations upon Lavellan’s heated skin.

“Well, Wolf?” Lavellan asked, voice a ruined whisper. Fen’Harel scraped his teeth down the column of Lavellan’s throat and Lavellan trembled. “Do I taste silver?”

“No,” he breathed and kissed him once more.

There were many things Lavellan couldn’t say, couldn’t tell him, so he let his actions speak for him. In this land of dreams where nothing and everything could be said at once.

He snaked his arms around Fen’Harel’s neck and pressed themselves closer, beyond the possible boundaries of themselves. *I missed you.*

Fen’Harel pulled away with some difficulty, his lips red and bruised, the hint of blood. Their rapid breaths mingled in the cooling night.

Lavellan met his reverent, unfocused gaze.

And against his lips, Fen’Harel murmured the answer to Lavellan’s earlier question as if imparting

a beautiful secret.

“Gold.”

Lavellan woke up.

Chapter End Notes

They're such good friends :)

This is why we adhere to social distancing rules, boys. Look what happened. You gave in to Feelings™

Listen, I spent way too much time agonising over and writing some of Solas' stories and their dialogue in Hallelujah cadence for it to go unnoticed so I'm pointing them out. Italicised is Lavellan.

"Back in the time of Elvhenan
there walked a proud, tempestuous man
who thought he knew the world and all it offered
He'd lost his faith for trust and love,
knew that to love was to be betrayed
and so he kept this castle cold and vacant. (extra alliteration because I just like it)

*He sounds lonely
Do you think so?
Lost faith tells me
that he first loved without reserve"*

and

*"The hunter claimed that Fen'Harel
would know the answer when, not if,
he found a way to snare and catch the hunter.
This means it was deliberate,
so that the trick the Dread Wolf sought
would end up being his hidden yet sure downfall.*

*I know what makes
the traps compelling.
Oh? What felled him?
The illusion of victory."*

Note that the storytelling begins with Solas' story about Fen'Harel and it starts in the Hallelujah cadence. And then Lavellan offers the ending for The Clever Star in Hallelujah cadence. They frame the storytelling segment. They also sing the chorus

together both instances with their dialogue and Solas always asks a question that leaves it up to Lavellan to reciprocate and finish the chorus. Lavellan reciprocates both times. Make of that what you will.

Translation:

[1] **Syn ma eolasem? Ar'an gelir na:** Did you know? We fear you [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ve na:** Behind you [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Imara em, Fen'Harel:** Face me, Dread Wolf [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Din, vun'lin. Ane na?:** No, sunling. Are you? [\[↑\]](#)

[5] **Fen'lin:** Wolfling [\[↑\]](#)

[6]

Shem'el, shem'el, fen'lin: Faster, faster wolfling

Ma felas: You're slow [\[↑\]](#)

[7] **Juithir:** We shall see [\[↑\]](#)

[8] **Josa, vun'lin. Junoran na:** Run, sunling. I will catch you. [\[↑\]](#)

Where oaths break

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

walk among your fallen kin—

He went through his morning routine in a daze, thoughts screaming yet silent, walked straight into the War Council with a smile he couldn't feel and a faint sting on his lips. His three advisors spoke of the ball and the preparations and he observed the map of the palace but nothing registered. The new information floated like leaves on a pond.

“—sitor? ... Inquisitor!”

His head snapped up and he blinked at Josephine's waiting look.

“I'm so sorry,” he said. “What was that?”

“The inner circle will be here soon,” she said, patient. “Which issue would you prefer to discuss at this time?”

Focus. Lavellan cleared his throat. “Strategy,” he said. “Should there be fighting in the palace, I don't want anyone caught off-guard.”

“Of course.”

The inner circle would be here soon.

He stared at the invitations on the table.

Solas would be here soon.

Dear fucking gods. He rubbed his eyes and paced as he waited, vaguely listening to the advisors' morning banter as he walked to the window and looked out, frowning at the clear sky. Winter was about to end.

Teeth scraping against neck. Lips fierce yet yielding.

Lavellan shook his head.

Why must they make everything so complicated?

Cullen put a hand to his shoulder and Lavellan jumped.

“Are you alright?” Cullen asked softly.

Lavellan smiled. “Just tired.”

Cullen frowned and searched his expression, but nodded.

The heavy doors to the War Room swung open behind him, followed by the inner circle's footsteps and chatter. Lavellan readied himself, still staring out the window, waiting until he had the strength to face them. To face Solas.

What was Solas thinking?

His distress must have summoned Vergala because she flew into his field of vision and he smiled, calming, and he stretched his arm out for her to land on. She cawed at him. It seemed to ask, *Are you okay?* He rubbed the underside of her beak.

“Have you eaten?” he asked her.

“Worms.”

He chuckled. “Very good.” She hopped onto his shoulders and he took a breath, then turned. His gaze met Cole’s wide-eyed stare, his lips parted and jaw slightly slack from whatever he’d sensed, and Lavellan subtly shook his head. Cole closed his mouth but his eyes remained wide.

“Good morning,” Lavellan greeted. “You’re all here because you’re all going to suffer with me at the Grand Masquerade and we’re going to play the Game and it’s going to be a joyful time for all of us, I’m sure.”

“I do so love parties,” said Dorian. The tension between them was beginning to fade. Lavellan suspected they were about to have a talk soon. “Especially when there are scandals to hear of and partake in.”

Varric grumbled.

“Don’t complain,” Cassandra muttered before he could speak.

“Hey! I was going to complain for both of us.”

“Vivienne,” said Lavellan, “how goes the uniforms?”

She was already so immaculate this early in the morning. Well, she did sleep the earliest out of the lot of them.

“Madame Sartre has received our measurements,” Vivienne said. “I believe they will be delivered to Marquise Lorraine’s Halamshiral estate when we spend the week there.”

“I’ve seen them, they look fantastic,” said Dorian.

“Looks itchy,” said Sera.

Lavellan hadn’t seen them. They wished to surprise him, apparently.

“Sera? Map?” he asked.

She beamed and unslung the giant canister on her back, almost hitting Varric in the process, and she dumped the large map onto the table.

“Friends came through,” she said. “Got all the secret places the servants go through... And vaults.”

“You’re a champion,” he praised and unrolled the map on the table, and true enough, it detailed all the secret passages.

“This place is fucking massive,” said Bull.

“Fucking massive,” Vergala repeated. Sera cackled. Lavellan reached up and covered the sides of Vergala’s head.

“You are corrupting the children,” Lavellan said.

“Oh, so *now* you care about the children!”

Cullen cleared his throat to disguise a laugh. “We must find a way to sneak soldiers and scouts into the palace, as well as weapons.”

“Emergency stashes or on our person?” asked Cassandra.

“It would depend.”

“We can set up emergency caches in important parts of the palace,” suggested Leliana. “For those who can manage to hide their weapons, we will wait until we have been checked for arms before surreptitiously delivering it to you so that you may hide it. Otherwise, you’ll have to rely on the caches.”

Lavellan scrutinised the map as his companions conversed, felt eyes on him. Was that Cole, Solas, or someone else? He wasn’t brave enough to check. What was he supposed to do now? How was he supposed to act around Solas without giving too much away or without driving him back?

Why did Solas act on it as Fen’Harel? Why not as Solas?

Was Solas regretting it?

“—sitor?”

Solas had separated himself. Again. What did that mean for them? How was Lavellan supposed to approach this?

“*Inquisitor!*”

Lavellan snapped to attention and looked up at Josephine. She gave him another of her patient smiles.

They were waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” he answered with the conviction of a guilty man pleading innocence.

“Very good, Inquisitor,” she said, ever so patient, “but we were looking for a number.”

“Oh.” He cast out for a random number. “Forty-five?”

“Forty-five hidden caches?” asked Leliana, quirking a brow. Lavellan pursed his lips to hide his grimace.

“Did I say forty-five? I meant to say four but changed my mind to five. I must have mixed the two up,” he said and laughed nervously. It was flimsy as far as excuses went and Leliana knew it.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “An easy mistake to make this early in the morning.”

“Are you sure you didn’t mean to say fifty-six?” asked Blackwall.

Bull grinned.

“Don’t you dare,” said Lavellan.

"We promise to say it in—"

"Less than five words," Bull and Blackwall finished in unison and guffawed along with the others who'd been told the story. Lavellan scowled.

"You should say that to the Empress," said Varric.

"We'd get kicked out," muttered Lavellan. "Then her pretty little neck is going to be slit or something worse." And somehow, some way, an elf would get blamed because that was how shitty Orlais was.

"That took a turn."

Josephine frowned at Lavellan, had been squinting throughout that exchange. She put her board down.

"Inquisitor, perhaps we should discuss these at a later time?" she suggested.

He blinked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"The masquerade plans. You seem a little... distracted this morning. Why don't you relieve yourself for today? We will handle some of the preparations that don't require your immediate attention."

"Ambassador Montilyet, are you sidelining me?"

"Merely expressing concern for your well-being, Inquisitor Lavellan." Her expression was gentle but her eyes were resolute and he knew that no matter what he did, he would still somehow find himself out of the War Room. *You best not embarrass yourself*, the glint in her eyes said.

"You have not been sleeping again," said Cassandra. "It is evident."

"Yeah, actually. Why don't you go back to bed, Glowy? We'll take it from here. You rest up before the inevitable shitstorm in Orlais."

"I slept just fine last night," he grumbled, still couldn't meet Solas' eyes. "I actually got a full night's rest."

"Yes, and I'm sure you've shocked your body with it," said Dorian, waving him off. "After subsisting on subpar sleep for so long. Go take a long nap."

"Naps give me a headache."

"Go and relax then, darling," Vivienne suggested. "Perhaps try the baths?"

Lavellan pressed his lips together. "I've already tried it," he said carefully. "It's why I fell asleep last night."

"That's excellent news, darling. Perhaps a nightly routine in the baths will help you."

Lavellan quite suspected that it wasn't the baths which had made him sleepy but rather, his companion. And his stories.

And hands.

Stop.

“Maybe,” he said instead and congratulated himself on the steady delivery.

“It was warm, and sweet,” murmured Cole and Lavellan shrieked internally. “Then it was dark, and wild.”

“Fine,” Lavellan cut in before Cole could continue. “I’ll go. Garden or something. But you let me know right away if I’m needed for something.”

“Of course, Inquisitor,” said Josephine, smiling in victory.

“You make the plants happy,” said Cole.

“I make the plants happy. That is so much better,” Lavellan mumbled to himself and walked around the table (the side opposite Solas). He swept out of the room and closed the door behind him. Vergala looked at him.

“Wow,” she cawed. He didn’t think birds could sound so sarcastic.

“You’re getting awfully smug for a bird that I can roast over a fire.”

“Wow,” she said again, undeterred.

Lavellan patted the soft and cold soil, made sure the elfroot would hold. There. Finished. He stood and wiped the sweat from his brow, beaming at his herb garden.

Ghoul’s beard was draped along the walls with rashvine for some colour (although, those were dangerous so he’d gated the herb garden to stop children from accidentally wandering in). Two thin beds boasted an array of all the herbs they could get their hands on for healing. The ones in the pots were more for cooking than alchemy — mints, basils, parsleys, etcetera. He’d been working away at it and now, he was finished.

The berries on the Prophet’s Laurels gleamed like small crystals of fire.

Halfway through his gardening, he felt eyes trained on his back, already knew who it was. Lavellan watered the new additions and washed his hands as he did. Solas approached.

What was he here to do? Tell Lavellan last night was a mistake and assume Lavellan would think of the baths while Solas meant a completely different thing? Apologise for being out of line? Ignore it had happened?

Honestly, Lavellan would prefer it if they just ignored it had ever happened.

What in the Void was he supposed to do about Fen’Harel?

“Solas,” Lavellan greeted once he was near enough.

“Inquisitor,” Solas greeted back. Not lethallin. He looked as if he hadn’t meant to come over. And he probably hadn’t.

“What do you think?” asked Lavellan and stepped back to appraise the garden because that was easier.

“You’ve done well,” was his soft reply. “It will be of great help to our healers, I’m certain.”

Lavellan gripped the handle of the watering can but kept his expression neutral. “Thank you,” he said. “What did you discuss when I left?”

“Nothing of great import. You and your advisors have already discussed it at an earlier date.”

He nodded. “Good.”

Silence. The soft chatter of those spending their morning in the garden drifted past his ears, the wind cooling his sun-heated skin.

“Inquisitor, about last night—”

“Play chess with me.”

Solas started at the abrupt interjection and Lavellan swept past him towards the gazebo. It was more of an order than a request. Solas had no choice but to follow.

Lavellan opened the drawer in the table, set up the chessboard, and sat on the side with the white pieces, gave Solas no time to comprehend what had just happened. Solas usually played white. Not today. Solas sat opposite Lavellan without complaint, but curiosity glimmered in his eyes.

They played the game in complete silence. Any attempts at conversation would be forced anyway and Lavellan needed to think. Besides, it would distract Solas enough. Stop him from spiralling into his regrets.

Solas smiled at one point during a certain manoeuvre.

Lavellan scoffed. “Don’t get smug.” First thing he’d said since the start of the game. “You don’t have me just yet.”

“If so, then I would omit the ‘just yet.’”

Oh good, trash talk. He could do trash talk.

“Should I?” He moved his winning piece and leaned back, haughty. “Check.”

Solas stared at the board, smile vanishing in favour of a frown. He was trapped. Solas sighed and moved a piece despite its futility.

“Checkmate,” Lavellan sang after he moved his knight and smiled. Solas smiled back.

“Well played,” he praised.

“I know.”

Solas shook his head, still smiling, and looked away to watch the garden. It was a calm morning.

Lavellan watched Solas instead.

He wasn’t sure why he’d been expecting Solas’ lips to show evidence of what they’d done last night. Wasn’t sure why he’d been expecting it to be somewhat swollen with an almost unnoticeable line of hardened blood from when Lavellan had bitten it.

None of that. All in a dream.

What were they supposed to do now?

“What about last night?” Lavellan asked despite his better judgement. It wasn’t as if he could ignore this until it went away, try as he might.

Solas stared at their finished game, didn't meet Lavellan's eyes.

“I... wished to apologise,” he said and Lavellan’s hands clenched over his lap. “If I overstepped. I realise my behaviour may have been inappropriate.”

“It wasn’t,” said Lavellan. “You didn’t overstep.”

He looked up at Lavellan then. That wasn’t what he wished to apologise for.

Another uneasy silence elapsed.

His saving grace came in the form of one Dorian Pavus, sauntering up to them with an easy smile.

“Inquisitor?” he asked. “Our dear Commander dearly wishes to speak with you. Something about a Samson fellow.”

Lavellan blinked. “Oh. Of course. Okay.” He gave Solas a meaningful look, though he wasn’t sure what he wanted to convey. “It’s fine, Solas. Really. You know I never hesitate to make a fuss if you do or say something I dislike.” *I didn’t say no last night even when you’d begged me to, even if it’d been the wise thing to do, did I?*

“It’s true,” Dorian piped up. “Though I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“See? Third party agrees.”

Solas’ troubled look didn’t fade but the rigid line of his shoulders relaxed, somewhat. Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat and turned to depart. This double speak business was exhausting.

Dorian placed a gentle hand on Lavellan's shoulder as he passed.

“Wait, before you go,” he said. “I... May we talk? Later. Or whenever. I understand you’re very busy.” He sighed. “I’ve thought about what you said and I— I’ve talked Bull’s ears off enough. And I suppose, you are the one I must apologise to.”

Lavellan smiled wryly. “What’s this? Two handsome men come to grovel for my forgiveness on the same day? My, my, I *am* blessed.”

Dorian chuckled. “Quite,” he said, but his eyes were glinting in intrigue at the prospect of Solas coming for an apology. His expression sobered. “I *am* serious though.”

“I know,” Lavellan murmured. He patted Dorian's shoulder. “Let’s meet on the battlements at dusk. Near the stables.”

“How romantic,” teased Dorian.

Lavellan laughed without humour, and all he could think of was the ill-thought-out kiss beneath an everlasting war between the stars and the moon. How was that for romance?

When he entered Commander Cullen's office, he was greeted by a lyrium kit being hurled at his face. He ducked in time. The vials and droppers crashed on the floor and Cullen jumped.

“Maker’s breath, forgive me,” he said.

Lavellan stared at the broken box. “*Three* handsome men asking for forgiveness,” he said dryly. “Truly a good day.”

“I... Sorry?”

“Don’t worry about it. Now then, I believe you’re in need of a hug. As am I, I think. No, Commander, you’re not getting out of it, don’t give me that face.”

He and Dorian spoke from dusk to night.

Each made the other a promise.

To rise for one another when change was demanded.

A week later, Lavellan crossed his arms and watched the procession of carriages pulling up in Skyhold, their luggage being loaded onto some of them.

“Are you ready?” asked Dorian behind him.

“Ready to leave or ready to face the no doubt piss-poor conditions in Halamshiral?”

“Bit of both.” He stood beside Lavellan. It was nice that they were on talking terms again. Whether in this life or the previous life, Dorian was still one of his closest friends, and being devoid of his company had highlighted the gap he filled in Lavellan’s heart. Dorian was still coming to terms with the whole ‘Slavery sucks, stop doing it’ idea, and he still slipped and said insensitive things sometimes, but he was trying and Lavellan could never fault anybody for that.

“Worship,” greeted someone. Lavellan turned. It was Samara, the stablehand. She smiled at him, dark eyes gleaming, smile warm and genuine, and even if she were a Fen’Harel agent, Lavellan could tell she was loyal to him, too.

What would happen if she had to choose?

“Morning, Samara,” he greeted. She always perked up when he remembered her name. “How’s Ahmael?” Her son. Lavellan had seen him around, toddling as toddlers did. Blackwall would often shower the boy with handmade gifts — a wooden rocking horse, wooden wheeled dragon, so on and so forth. Then again, he would shower all the children with handmade gifts.

“He’s started getting an interest in mice.” She sighed. “Of all the animals...”

“Still putting rocks in his mouth?”

“No, thank the Maker.”

"I hope Master Dennet isn't too fussed that we're taking out half of his best steeds."

"Complained about it the whole way through the night," she said. "But he brushed them solid. I'm sure he's secretly happy you're parading his mounts through Orlais."

"Will you come to Halamshiral too?"

"After the initial preparations, yes. Master Dennet can't come to tend to the mounts for your return, so he's sending me along with a small retinue. You'll see us around."

He nodded. "Who's taking care of Ahmael?"

"My wife is staying back to watch over him," she said and smiled. "I'm not too worried."

Lavellan gave her a look.

"Maybe a little," she mumbled and frowned.

He laughed and patted her shoulder. "Understandable enough. I'm sure they'll be fine." Josephine called for him and he sighed. "Off I go. Wish me luck."

"Take care, Inquisitor." She hesitated, something dark lingering in the corners of her eyes. "Halamshiral is a graveyard."

They shared a solemn look.

He looked away and murmured, "For now."

She stared. He merely gave her another small smile and a soft farewell. She was a lovely woman, kind. He enjoyed conversing with her before and after his journeys into and out of Skyhold, but he was always wary.

If his memory was correct, she was a shapeshifter.

"She seems to like you," said Dorian once they were out of earshot. "You really make an effort to know the people working for you."

"I have to," he said. "They're still people. I can't let them fade in the background."

"This is why you're a good man."

He shot Dorian a glance. "And to keep an eye on spies."

Dorian paused on a step, but kept walking. "This is why you're also an alive man." He frowned. "Is she...?"

"No," he lied.

They reached the carriages and Josephine gestured at the foremost one.

"Well, I'll see you when we reach Halamshiral," said Dorian and waved him goodbye. "Try not to miss me too much."

"I'd say the same, but I suspect you'll have enough entertainment being stuck with Solas and Vivienne in the same carriage. Whose idea was that again?"

"Mine," said Dorian. "Mage to mage talk, you know?"

"Does that involve trash-talking Solas' clothes?"

"You know us very well."

Lavellan laughed. "Go easy on the poor man. He enjoys the image he's cultivated."

"You enjoy that image he's cultivated."

He scoffed and swung into the carriage, closed it on Dorian's laughing face. He sat beside Cullen and looked up to Leliana and Josephine's mischievous smiles.

"What?" he asked.

"You did not answer," said Leliana, smile growing.

"It did not deserve one."

"I see."

Lavellan huffed and looked out the window as the carriage moved, thus beginning the journey to Halamshiral. His jaw clenched.

This. Was going to suck.

For the first week, they would stay at the Lorraine Estate and spend the Wintersend celebrations there. Josephine already had about five plays she wanted to drag him off to. Then, more preparations for the ball.

The ball would be held on the Monday of the second week.

They discussed the ball, discussed the more fun aspects of it. Lavellan wished he could talk to Leliana about the espionage, the secrets, the scandals, the hidden thrill of knowing somebody's secrets and using your words to subtly turn the tide of the conversation. It was a battle of a different manner. Not that he could. It would raise too many questions.

So he sat and smiled and agreed in his head.

The dancers weave and sway with the ethereal, layered music. Silks and sheer satin are draped over our nimble bodies and I see the crowd far better here than if I were within it. I see the bored, the unimpressed, the wowed, the desirous, the scheming.

I find my mark. They leave amidst the revelries.

Once the song ends and the dancers retreat, I slip away and wave my magic upon my face, changing its appearance once more. Someone unremarkable. I pass a servant and grab the offered serving garb, change my clothes as swiftly as I changed my face. Gone is the lithe dancer. Here is the meek servant.

I encounter another servant and I take their tray.

There is a poisoned drink amidst the dozen arrayed.

I know which it is.

I know who to give it to.

And they will never even see me.

“Good luck, [Isha'belsal'in^{\[1\]}](#),” the servant murmurs as they pass.

“I do not need it.”

Lavellan knocked his head against the side of the carriage and hissed, rubbing the sore spot. His advisors blinked at him in surprise. He laughed nervously.

“I spaced out,” he said.

“Do you always hit your head when you space out?” asked Cullen, a faint smile on his lips.

“I promise not to do it in front of the Orlesian nobles.”

“Please refrain,” said Josephine.

Lavellan looked out the window once more and mulled on the memory. So he'd also been involved in courtly intrigue? Had he been Dirthamen's spymaster? Or had Dirthamen been the spymaster? The spymaster of the spymaster? Agent of the spymaster?

He leaned his chin on his elbow and frowned.

Changed faces. He'd used magic to literally rearrange his face. Yes... he had... Lavellan looked down at his hands, and for a brief second, existence crushed him, grew bars and cages and wrapped tight like a noose, constricted with every breath. Every movement. Something within him reached out and met a barrier and it shrieked and screeched and the Well roared and his vision whited and *what has he done? What has he done? This was too far, Rebel—!*

He jolted and knocked his head again. His advisors' concerned looks met his wide-eyed one.

“Are you sure you're alright?” asked Cullen.

“I think I'm just tired,” he lied. “Nothing that a solid sleep can't fix.”

Leliana eyed him but said nothing else.

Lavellan looked out the window as the advisors continued their previous conversation. His fingertips tingled. An unknown pressure had wrapped around his being, but it faded as the seconds passed.

Isha'belsal'in, the servant had called him... Yes, the Man of Many Faces. Another name. A figure of legend, the name that parents had used to threaten their children with if they misbehaved. The name they'd whispered in either fear, awe, or a mix of either.

“Behave or else Belsal'in will take you.”

“He could be anywhere, could be one of us, so hold your tongue.”

But those thoughts took a backseat upon arrival at Halamshiral. The carriages went straight to the

High Quarter where the humans resided, where the nobles resided, so that the Halamshiral slums weren't the first thing that visitors would see. But over the ornate walls, he could still catch glimpses of the slums and the dreary and incongruous backdrop they made. His lips pursed.

"Inquisitor," said Leliana softly, a silent question.

Lavellan stayed quiet, kept his eyes trained on the small sliver beyond until it disappeared behind rich blue walls and perfectly trimmed hedges.

"You know what the elves call the Dales, don't you?" he asked his advisors. Upon their silence, he gave them a grave look. "The Promise."

Marquise Lorraine was a gentle, if eccentric woman with a passion for taxidermy.

Solas eyed the stuffed wolf in the foyer.

Lavellan shuffled away from the ravens. Vergala outright said, "No," and flew out the window.

"Inquisitor Lavellan," she greeted, Orlesian accent dripping like syrup over her words. "What a pleasure it is to finally meet you! I have heard the greatest tales."

He took her offered hand and planted a chaste kiss on her knuckles.

"The pleasure is all mine, Marquise Lorraine," he returned. "I thank your gracious hospitality for offering us temporary accommodations."

"Oh my, you are very well-spoken and charming for a Dalish!" she praised.

His smile tightened and he forced himself to let go of her hand instead of gripping harder.

"You are very kind," he said.

His companions offloaded their things and the servants scurried about. Sera shared a look with one of them. Red Jenny. Sera caught him looking and winked. He smiled faintly and sent her a subtle nod.

Marquise Lorraine gave them a tour of the important areas of the estate while talking of politics. Lavellan smiled the whole way, knew how to make it look sincere, make it look as if he cared more than two rat's asses. The afternoon wore on like that until his cheeks were hurting and his palms were stinging from his nails digging into them. Marquise Lorraine's servants were mostly elves and she treated them politely. Lavellan wasn't sure how much of that was a show for him.

After the pleasantries were well and out of the way, Lavellan retreated into his designated room and slammed the door shut.

Opulent room. Marble floors, lush carpet, bed with ornate headboard, paintings of forests. Lavellan opened the window. His only view was the estate's large garden.

A week here. Creators have mercy. He never wanted to spend more than two days in Orlais.

He left the room and hunted for his companions, following the laughter and loud noises. Lavellan

entered a large salon where the others had set up a table. He spotted the cards on the table and grinned.

“Should I join or am I going to wind up losing my clothes again?” he asked.

“You are absolutely not allowed to join,” said Varric. “Some of us are still in debt.”

“Get better then,” he laughed.

“Sera, go chase him out.”

Lavellan ran from Sera. They slipped on a carpet during their chase and almost broke a vase but it didn't actually break so that was *not important*.

He grew restless.

The ball was two nights away.

Josephine had dragged him off to five different plays which were all somehow loosely connected in the most obscure of ways and he did enjoy piecing the stories together, but cramming five plays in three days was a little too much.

Yet they never left the High Quarter.

In Ferelden, the elves numbered few among the humans, and so, they were sequestered in an alienage.

In Halamshiral, the elves outnumbered humans, and so, it was the humans who'd holed themselves away up in the High Quarter. Sometimes, he'd see the Winter Palace depending on where he was. Sometimes, he'd see the slums.

His gaze would linger on the slums, considering, but duty had always dragged him away.

Not tonight.

Come dusk, he geared himself. Enough for protection, but nothing that would attract attention. Lavellan threw a cloak over himself and pulled the hood up because among the city elves, Dalish elves were legends — almost mystical beings who lived in the forests. His vallaslin would cause more trouble than it was worth. Josephine would pinch his ear.

He slipped away.

Vergala surveyed from the skies, occasionally perching atop rooftops. He stopped at the guarded gates to the High Quarter, chewed on his lip, gaze trailing towards the walls. Anyone who left the High Quarters would garner attention and that was rather contrary to what he wanted.

Lavellan stuck to the shadows of the twilight. He jumped on a passing wagon, propelled himself towards the wall, gripped its edge, and jumped off. He landed into a roll and grimaced as his shins jarred.

And he was out.

Halamshiral was a large city and he wasn't sure why he was even visiting the Low Quarters. What was he hoping to accomplish? To depress himself? To see the truth and realise there really was nothing he could do for them despite his grand, sweeping statements to Solas? To anger himself?

The residences surrounding the High Quarter were in relatively good conditions. For the high-ranking servants maybe.

Lavellan walked.

Soon, the neighbourhood grew destitute. Lavellan stuck to the torch-lit alleys, ignored the shady gatherings, minded his own business.

There were blockaded areas in the slums, the buildings beyond crumbled and blackened by the fire Celene had ordered set a year ago. Where were the elves who'd used to live there? Had they even been granted the courtesy of another home?

If they hadn't died, that was.

Whatever rebellious fighting spirit the elves had had a year ago was gone, stamped out by Celene and the difficulties of the civil war, stamped out by the petty disputes of nobles.

A few shot Lavellan looks as he passed. He kept his head down.

The roads were narrow and unmaintained, derelict homes like mismatched blocks stacked upon each other to dangerous heights and shoved close. If only to house more in one area. People hung their laundry on the lines across the buildings, the faded clothes fluttering like banners. Parents came home for the day, entering their homes with their spouses or children or friends greeting them at the door. Children laughed and played in the bowels of the slums without a care for the danger, because the only danger they'd face would be from humans or strangers. The elves of Halamshiral looked after one another.

Surviving, reaching for the next day with all they had.

Guards made the rounds. Lavellan paused, stayed at the mouth of an alley and watched them pass. As did the elves. They halted their activities, trained their gazes upon the guards, followed their every move. Either from fear or for intimidation. He wasn't sure. Maybe both.

One of the children came running out from a road, unaware.

He crashed into the guards.

Everybody tensed and Lavellan was already readying himself, ready to launch himself forward if needed.

The little boy staggered back, eyes wide.

"Watch it," grunted the guard and shoved the boy away.

Lavellan gritted his teeth. The boy crashed onto his legs and elbows and quickly scurried away, bleeding from the scrapes.

Once the guards passed, everybody relaxed. He peered around the corner and found a woman tending to the little boy's wounds. He wasn't crying.

No, he remained silent, lips pressed so tight that the red had lightened into white. And his large

eyes burned.

Such vitriolic anger on such a young face.

Halamshiral was a simmering pot. It would burst one day when the humans weren't looking. Last year's small rebellion was not the explosion, merely the first sputter of steam. He'd been wrong. Celene hadn't stamped out the fight.

She'd given it fuel.

It would consume her if she wasn't careful, and this time, no Briala to help her.

Or it could consume Gaspard. It would depend on the outcome of the peace talks. He still hadn't made up his mind about who would get to keep the throne. It was no use playing humble at this point. His decision would be consequential for Orlais in two nights, he'd make damn sure of it. Lavellan would come barrelling in through their front door, he would play their Game, and he would *hang* them all with the strings that they manipulated others with.

The dark thoughts took him aback. He shook his head. Tone it down. He wasn't there to murder the whole court.

Maybe.

Joking!

Maybe.

Lavellan moved on.

The whole minding his own business thing didn't work for long. He passed four elves, all of them watching him as he walked. It was night now. The torches barely lent any illumination.

He turned a corner. Movement behind him.

Vergala cawed twice.

Two sets of footsteps followed him. Where were the other two? Must be above him, on the roof.

This alley was so damn long.

Were they armed? How skilled were they at fighting? Hit and runners? Muggers?

Well, he was about to find out.

One leapt at him from the roof. Lavellan stepped aside and kicked their back, the momentum doing most of the work. The other three jumped to action.

A knife flashed.

He dodged, arrested the wielder's wrist, twisted and threw them over his shoulders right into their charging friend. Ducked the swing of the fourth elf. Jabbed into their gut with his elbow.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," said Lavellan.

His answer was a punch.

Lavellan rolled with the hit and crouched, swept his leg and hooked. His puncher fell and flailed. Lavellan's cheek throbbed. Oh gods, Jo was going to murder him.

The one with the knife swung at him again, expression enraged in the firelight.

Lavellan rolled away, pulled the hood back up before they could see his face and fuck, the hood was blocking his peripheries.

Just as he thought that, some asshole tackled him from the side.

They sprawled onto the slick alley floors. The slick wasn't water.

"Hold him!"

Lavellan threw the scrawny man off him without a problem, though he took care not to hurt him too badly.

Knife de Slash swung again and Lavellan ducked, rose and hooked his arm around Knife's neck and threw him against his friend. Lavellan was doing an awful lot of throwing people against other people. They'd given him little choice.

"Now, now," Lavellan tried to placate, "I've no money on me."

"We're not looking for your money, shem," one hissed.

"Ah." He sidestepped another slash. Right, that knife had to go. "I'm not human." Lavellan slipped in close to Knife de Slash. He jolted back in alarm but Lavellan held his wrist, twisted harshly, and he cried out. The knife dropped. Lavellan kicked it away and leapt back from the answering punch.

"You're still a stranger," spat another. "We don't welcome strangers here. We're not an attraction."

They regrouped, ganged up on him, wild and furious in the torchlight.

Three of them.

Hang on, where was the—

Tackled once more! Lavellan's head knocked back against the stone. Oh fucking hell. At this rate, even Revasha would be disappointed. And rightly so.

His tackler was more solid than the scrawny one from earlier, heavier.

He waited for the blows, but none came. Lavellan blinked at the elf above him. He was younger than Lavellan had thought, couldn't have been older than twenty. His eyes were wide as he stared at Lavellan, fist pulled back, but it stayed pulled. Lavellan frowned. Why wasn't he—

His hood had fallen off.

Ah, shit.

The vallaslin.

He scrambled off of Lavellan as if he were a ghost. A legend. And he was, to them. Lavellan clicked his tongue and sat up, rubbing the back of his head. The four huddled back like frightened little ducklings and all they could do was stare and gawk.

Who wasn't the attraction now?

Lavellan waited, made sure he wasn't concussed, and stood . No dizziness. Just a throb. Good.

The four watched him, unsure.

"I did try to ask nicely," he said.

Knife de Slash stepped forward. His fair hair was tied back, dark eyes glimmering with equal parts wonder and fear and Lavellan almost sighed.

"Please, hahren," he started. "Accept our sincerest apologies. We... We thought you were— We misjudged."

"Who'd you think I was?" he asked and shoved the hood back on. It smelled like piss. He smelled like piss. Great.

"We thought you were a spy. Or someone the shems had sent to start shit up."

"Ah, sorry to take your heroics from you then. Not here to start shit up."

"Are you here to help with the disappearances?" asked the other at the back. The one who'd tackled him and scrambled away. He was the broadest of the lot, nose crooked as if it had been broken numerous times.

Lavellan regarded them. Disappearances?

Another elbowed Tackle. Thin, shortest of them. Scruffy-haired. The one who'd tackled Lavellan first. Whose idea was that? Although, Lavellan supposed he looked misleadingly scrawny with a cloak on him.

"The Dalish aren't magical saviours come to save us when we're in trouble," said Scruffy. "They don't give two shits about us."

"They most definitely aren't magical saviours," agreed Lavellan. "But luckily for you, I give more than two shits. Tell me about these disappearances."

Scruffy frowned at him. "Why?"

"Damn, I don't know," he said.

They stared at him. He gave no other answer.

"Maybe we should discuss this elsewhere," said the last of them. Tight cap on their head, blonde curls escaping.

"Why?" Scruffy asked again. "What can he do that we haven't already tried?"

"He has daggers on him, did you notice?" asked Cap.

Scruffy hesitated. The other two stared.

"He... He does?"

Lavellan lifted his cloak and showed the two daggers with a smile, made his vallaslin shift. That was still his favourite trick. Maybe that was the true reason why he'd wanted to keep it. What

would Solas have done if he'd said, "No, I want to keep it because I can scare people when I make my face muscles move a certain way?"

"And you saw how he moved," continued Cap, eyes squinting as they studied him. "We had so much trouble getting him down and he's barely even huffed. He could have drawn his daggers and killed us in seconds but he didn't." Not bad.

"He's still only one person," huffed Scruff.

"Better than just us four," said Tackle. Lavellan should really learn their names.

They faltered at that, and glanced at Lavellan. He was still lost, but all he knew was that there was trouble in Halamshiral's streets. More than usual.

"Well, what do you have to lose?" Lavellan asked and shrugged. "I'm all ears."

"We would welcome your help, hahren," said Knife. "But we also can't be sure of your intentions. Why are you here? The Dalish don't come to the city."

"Not usually," said Lavellan. "I'm an exception, I suppose. I travel around. I help my clan better if I'm away from them."

"Help with what?" asked Scruffy.

"Surviving." All his humour had gone from his voice and they sensed the sudden shift. "Well, you've piqued my interest now, little merry band of four. Are you the only ones looking into these disappearances?" How had he not heard of such a thing?

Ah, right.

The nobles didn't give a shit.

"The guards won't do anything," spat Scruffy. "Got punched the other day for being annoying."

Lavellan scowled.

"Let's talk about this elsewhere," said Knife. "Come on."

They led Lavellan further down the road and entered an establishment which looked the same as all the others, but the interior had been turned into a tavern. Sawdust littered the floor to absorb spilled drinks and unsavoury fluids. Lavellan earned a few looks from the crowd, but he hoped the dim light would cast enough shadows to obscure his vallaslin. Vergala flew in and rested on the rafters along with the other birds who'd made their way inside.

Merry Band of Four sat at an unoccupied corner table. Lavellan settled himself where he could keep an eye on the tavern. It was loud enough here to drown out gossip.

"About a month ago," started Knife, leaning in close while Tackle ordered drinks to blend in, "the butcher's daughter disappeared. Arana. The guards say she must have run away, but we know Arana. She loves her family, takes care of her siblings. She wouldn't just leave them. Not like that. She'd at least leave a letter. Next week, two more girls disappear. Then the next, five. Eight missing girls. Guards won't do shit."

"My sister went missing," said Tackle, expression twisting into something bitter. "I want to find her."

“We’re all friends. We wanted to help,” explained Cap.

“Are you four part of a larger group?” asked Lavellan.

“We’re not working with the thieves’ guild if that’s what you’re implying,” hissed Scruffy, bristling.

“Easy, da’len,” he said. “I wasn’t implying anything. I was just asking if you’re a dedicated organised group or just four elves who saw something wrong and decided to do something about it.” He appraised Scruffy. “Although, you gave a valiant attempt to pick my pockets earlier. I think you would’ve succeeded in pilfering valuables off me if I’d been carrying them.”

Scruffy stared at him, face tense, and Lavellan stared back in challenge, gaze steady.

Knife sighed. “Fine. We run with the thieves every now and again, but this isn’t something they can help with. We’re on our own for this.”

“Besides,” said Cap, tone turning morose, “nobody wants to risk angering the nobles. Not after—” They cut themselves off and looked away.

Not after the Halamshiral rebellion.

“Alright, and what have you got so far?” asked Lavellan.

They shared a look.

“With all due respect, hahren,” started Knife, “you’ll have to forgive us for being apprehensive.”

“Nothing to forgive. I’d be suspicious too,” he said. “But listen, if it’s truly been almost a month, then you need to hurry. I wouldn’t go off believing fairy tales about the Dalish being noble protectors of the city elves because they’ve got their own surviving to do. However—” he leaned forward and smiled— “this Dalish *is* willing to help, if you’ll let him.”

Scruffy narrowed his eyes. “How can you alone help?”

“Ever killed a dragon before?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Ever killed darkspawn? Mercenaries? Mages? Templars? Demons?”

“You’re not seriously saying you’ve killed those things.”

“I can say them again without smiling,” he said.

Knife frowned. “Anybody can brag, hahren.”

“That’s true,” said Lavellan. “But I’m not here to prove my prowess. Merely offering assistance. Say no and I’ll walk right out of here.” Tough shit, Lavellan was still going to investigate it. “Say yes and I’ll listen and help. Discuss it amongst yourselves if you’d like.”

The four of them glanced at one another. Meanwhile, Lavellan watched the patrons of the tavern, discouraged any onlookers with a sharp stare, and gathered inferences from observing random people. Warm-up for the ball.

Still, what could have caused the disappearances? Fellow elves? Kidnappings? Murders? These

four didn't even consider the possibility of murder, which meant that they knew something that ruled it out. Was Briala on the case? Was she even aware of it?

"Alright hahren," said Knife and Lavellan tuned back in. "Nobody else will help us. And I suppose, if it came down to a fight..."

"I don't just fight, da'len," he said. "But alright, the fact that you think it may come down to a fight suggests to me that you know something. Am I wrong?"

Cap eyed him. "You're astute."

"It's why I'm alive."

Their drinks came. Lavellan didn't touch his.

"Some of our contacts in the thieves' guild have noted strange activity near the eastern outskirts of the city," said Tackle. "By the river."

"What's in the eastern outskirts?" Lavellan asked.

"Old warehouses. Near the old docks."

Lavellan frowned. Missing people, specifically female elves, near the docks where it was easy to get away. He had a suspicion, but he'd keep listening. He could be wrong.

He hoped he was wrong.

"They saw wagons going in and out the road to the docks," said Knife. "Those roads aren't used anymore, so nobody would have noticed usually. It was lucky that our contact had a job nearby and saw."

"When do you see the wagons?" asked Lavellan. "In relation to the disappearances, I mean."

"A few days after a disappearance."

"Could be moving to a secondary location then. Common tactic," he mumbled. "Lose the trail."

"They also saw hooded figures haunting the docks," said Cap.

"Ah, is that why you jumped me?" asked Lavellan. "Surely I'm not the only one who wears a cloak around here."

"No, but you were the first one we didn't recognise," said Scruffy. "Might as well take our chances."

"That was incredibly stupid, I hope you know," said Lavellan. "What if I turned out to be the kidnapper? What if I was a mage? A soldier? Someone who could have easily killed you? Always scout someone out before you decide to attack them."

They at least looked chided.

"We were getting desperate," admitted Tackle. "I was getting desperate. I insisted. You're right, I could've gotten us killed."

Knife nudged him. "We all agreed to it too. We share the blame." He looked at Lavellan. "This is all we have so far. Do you still think you can help, hahren?"

Lavellan leaned back and hummed, considering it.

“I can only return for tomorrow night,” he said. “So if you want to move things along, I’m going to need you four to scout out the warehouses and find the right one. Don’t engage. When night falls, I’ll hit the warehouse with you.” Was this wise? They were young and likely inexperienced in a true fight. Lavellan wasn’t sure what kind of things they would face.

But if it was something as covert as this, it was likely only a small operation. No matter how abandoned, the old Halamshiral docks were small, and large ships or frequent activity would be conspicuous.

Besides, this was their home. If they wanted to fight to protect it, then Lavellan couldn’t take that from them.

“Does that sound agreeable to you?” he asked them.

“Will we need weapons?” asked Cap.

“Do you have them? I understand they don’t let you carry blades longer than your palm.”

“We have caches throughout the city.”

“Okay, good. Nothing showy or heavy. Just enough to keep you alive if it comes down to it. Same goes for clothing.” He smiled. “We’ll meet at the alley where you jumped me. When the first moon is midway to its zenith. Sound good?”

The four of them shared a resolute look, and nodded at Lavellan.

Now then, Halamshiral, he thought. What has stirred the dust of your ancient bones?

Chapter End Notes

-->[Solas' POV of last chapter](#)<--

We take a little detour before the Winter Palace because Halamshiral is mostly comprised of the slums and we only see the pretty gilded walls in Inquisition. Let's go beyond those walls, shall we? Also, LMAO at Solas and Lavellan attempting damage control.

Vivienne: try the baths darling

Lavellan: *windows xp error sound*

Cole: OvO

ALSO, WISTERICC [MADE A DOODLE COMIC](#), BLESS YOU.

Honestly, some of you say some real funny shit. I have given you nothing but pain yet you reward me with mirth. How blessed.

Or maybe this is your coping mechanism. See, that also makes sense. If you laugh, it doesn't hurt, right?

[1] **Isha'belsal'in:** The Man of Many Faces [\[↑\]](#)

Birth of a nation

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint! Reminder to walk, stretch, drink water, eat, or sleep if you're able :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

by virtue of shared blood—

It was late by the time he returned to the Lorraine Estate. He snuck back to his room and was but a few steps away from his door when—

“—gone. My agents haven’t seen—”

Josephine, Leliana, and Solas turned the corner of the hallway and stopped at the sight of him. Lavellan froze, standing in his piss-soaked cloak.

The long silence stretched.

Lavellan took a step back—

“Inquisitor!” Josephine scolded and crossed the distance in long, brisk strides. Ah shit. “We were worried *sick*. You suddenly disappear with this—” she snapped the small note he’d left at his face — “with no other information?”

“I said I’ll be back?” he asked, voice small as he shrunk away from her. Fear her wrath. It was the nice ones you had to watch out for.

“That was it! It said nothing else! Where have you been?”

“Uh, Halamshiral?”

“You went to the slums,” said Solas. It wasn’t a question.

Lavellan pursed his lips.

Josephine squinted at him. “Is that...?” She yanked his hood back before he could stop her, brushed her fingers over his cheek, and he flinched when she pressed. “You got into a *fight*?” she asked, pitch rising. Josephine made a face and moved back. “And you smell like...”

“Piss, yes, I know,” he sighed. “I got jumped in an alley.”

Josephine rubbed her face and massaged her temples, then pointed at his room like an angered mother. “Go to your room and get yourself washed.” She held her hand out. “Give me your cloak.”

Lavellan did so. Behind her, Leliana made no effort to conceal her amused smile while Solas’ frown was practically engraved into his face.

“I am going to wash this,” said Josephine. “Or burn it. Never again, understand?”

Lavellan nodded like the liar he was and Solas stared at him with a look that said, “Your lies far outnumber my sins.” Or something like that. It sure looked like that.

She sighed. “I managed to find an excuse for your absence during dinner but I cannot make the same excuse twice, Inquisitor. Please. No more surprise, spontaneous decisions. Or at least inform us of them first.”

“It would hardly be a surprise if he were to tell people, Josie,” said Leliana and Josephine groaned.

“Please do not encourage him.” She shook her head. “Just... I am glad you are unharmed, Inquisitor. Now please, wash the stench of urine off yourself. Have a good night. Please make sure you are at the breakfast tomorrow.”

Josephine and Leliana left, but Solas remained. He nodded at Solas and moved to walk past him, get it done as soon as he could.

For a moment, Lavellan thought Solas would let him through without a word, but Solas stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. Before Lavellan could ask, Solas placed a hand on his cheek. He almost flinched back from the comforting warmth. Solas’ hand glowed green and the soreness on Lavellan’s cheek faded.

“Thanks,” he mumbled once Solas finished, and this time, Solas didn’t stop him as he moved to his room.

“What else happened?” asked Solas.

Lavellan opened his door. “Nothing that would interest you,” he said.

“You lie, da’len,” he said, eyes narrowing, and Lavellan bristled at the address but he managed to hide it. Far too used to lethallin or vun’lin.

“Good night. I’m going to wash off the smell of piss and despair.” He closed the door behind him and didn’t bother to catch Solas’ reaction. He also bathed as fast as he was able.

Lingering in the bath too long would bring about unwanted thoughts.

As promised, he was a good boy. He did his Inquisitorial duties in the morning, shared his final dinner with Lady Lorraine, and when the first moon was almost mid-way to the sky, he excused himself and lied about needing plenty of rest for tomorrow night’s ball.

Solas’ gaze followed him the whole way out the dining room.

Lavellan geared up and left another note on his nightstand.

Sorry Jo,

Don’t fret. I’ll be back soon. I’m needed somewhere.

Okay, so that wasn’t very informational.

He put another cloak on and left through the window. Vergala flew and patrolled the skies.

Lavellan was almost out of the estate's gates when he felt a presence behind him. He stopped.

"Go back to bed, Solas," was his greeting. "I'll be back in the morning."

"And where are you going?"

Lavellan turned. Solas was frowning, already geared lightly.

"Oh no you don't," said Lavellan. "Go back. You're not coming with me."

"I do not seem to recall asking for your permission."

They stared one another down in the moonlight. Again in the moonlight. Always in the bloody damn moonlight.

"Go back," Lavellan said again.

"No."

"Your Inquisitor orders you to go back."

Solas chuckled dryly. "Ah, and now you wish for me to call you Inquisitor. How conditional."

"You don't even care!" Lavellan snapped.

"Evidently I do, though you certainly insist on being difficult most days."

"Not me," he said and swallowed back a sigh. Or a groan. Both at once. "Them."

"Do you think me such a callous man?" asked Solas. "Do you think my acceptance of my inability to help the elves as I am now equates to uncaringness? And what of you? Is this how you plan to help the elves of Halamshiral? By disappearing every night to go fight in the dark alleys of the slums?"

Lavellan's fists clenched at his sides. "You know nothing."

"You will not let me!" His eyes sparked, more slate than grey as it always was in the night. Lavellan pursed his lips. "What am I to make of your current actions? So reckless in your ideals that you neglect to inform those around you of your activities? Worrying them and abandoning your duties as Inquisitor to play vigilante?"

"I am not abandoning my duties as Inquisitor," said Lavellan, insulted.

"You will have to forgive me if I do not believe it. Your actions speak otherwise."

"So I should just ignore situations where I'm needed, right?"

"No, but they could certainly be approached with more caution. More consideration—"

"It's time-sensitive, you ass!" he erupted. Gods, he was so— Solas and his propensity to grab Lavellan's irritation by the ear and harass it until it revealed itself was unwelcome right now. "I only just found out yesterday and I think it's slave trafficking! There, are you happy?"

"It was a simple matter of telling me," he said, scowling. "You do not have to fuss like a child. Do you even have a plan?"

“Of course I have a plan.”

“Which does not involve you charging headlong into things, slicing with your daggers, and calling it a day.”

“It’s nice to know you’ve placed great faith in me.”

“And I see you have placed a similar amount in me,” Solas returned. “Did you believe I would scoff had you told me? My earlier question was not rhetorical. Do you truly think I do not care?”

“Fine, I misspoke,” he muttered. They had *no time* for this! “I thought you’d see there’s nothing to be done and leave it at that.”

Solas pressed his lips. “And I thought perhaps you had a higher opinion of me than that. You are being both unreasonable and foolish.” He tilted his head. “And might I add, a terrible friend.”

Lavellan opened his mouth in affront, ready for a scathing remark, but he stilled his tongue. He closed his mouth and frowned at Solas.

“We agreed to wait,” Cassandra growled. Lavellan flicked his gaze up at her.

“Had we waited, our scouts would be dead,” he said and returned to studying the map.

“You should have discussed—”

“What good will that do?” he cut off irritably.

“At least let us know! Now we have given ourselves away and Solas’ agents will ruin the plans we have painstakingly created for half the year.”

Lavellan didn’t answer. Was barely listening.

Cassandra slammed her gauntleted hand over the map and obstructed his view, forced him to look back up at her. The items on the table shuddered from the impact.

“You are not listening,” she seethed.

“I made the right choice. We haven’t completely given ourselves away. The plan can be salvaged —”

“That is not the point!” Cassandra sighed and threw her hands up, paced. “You cannot keep doing this, Mahanon. We beg of you, listen to us. You do not have to fight alone. We are in this fight together, so act as such. That is our one advantage over Solas’ disconnected unit.”

“Disconnected but still formidable. But yes, do go on about the power of our sparkling connection and friendship. It will surely defeat a god.”

Hurt flickered in his eyes, replaced by frosty steel. “You,” she said lowly, “are being a terrible leader. More than that, you are being a terrible friend. You forget that cooperation is how the Inquisition had defeated Corypheus.” Cassandra rolled the map on the table and ignored his protests. “Perhaps you should sit out for a while.”

“You’re sidelining me?” he asked, pitch rising in incredulity. “You can’t do that!”

“Can’t I? A horrid feeling, is it not? Being kept in the dark? Take some time to reflect, Mahanon. Just because we are fighting a terrible opponent does not mean you must become so terrible

yourself."

She walked out and slammed the door. He gritted his teeth, roared and kicked the chair.

Cassandra had been a true friend. She'd taken none of his bullshit and had knocked some semblance of sense into him.

Lavellan looked away, shoulders slumping. He was doing it again.

"Ir abelas, lethallin," Lavellan said, passing a hand over his face. "I am being unfair."

"Yes," Solas grunted.

"Alright," he murmured. "Alright. Come on, then. I'll... I'll explain on the way."

At this time of the night, nobody would be lingering around the High Quarter so Lavellan walked straight past the guards. They recognised him and let them pass without further trouble, and he briefed Solas about the situation on the way.

Lavellan arrived at the alley where the four were already waiting for him.

Scruffy frowned. "You're late," he said.

"I got held back," said Lavellan and they finally noticed Solas.

"What the hell is this?" hissed Scruffy. "I thought—"

"He's with me," said Lavellan. "He's a mage. He might be able to help."

They eyed him.

"He's not Dalish," said Cap.

"No," Solas replied curtly.

"Where's his staff?" asked Scruffy, squinting.

"We do not always need them," said Solas.

"It's in his coat. It shrinks," said Lavellan, ruining Solas' attempts to be mysterious and evasive. Solas appreciated this wholly if the unimpressed side-eye was anything to go by. "Did you find the warehouse?"

Knife nodded. Lavellan already knew their names but they'd insisted that he keep calling them by the nicknames he'd given them.

"And?"

"Cap got in through an upper window," said Knife. "They've got the eight girls tied up. Few guards outside, more inside."

"How many do you think?" he asked Cap.

"No more than fifteen inside," they said. "Not sure about outside."

Lavellan looked at Tackle and his gaze softened. "Are you alright? Did you see your sister?"

His expression hardened. “No. Only Cap could get in. But that’s for the best. I’d just get angry and I would’ve blown it.”

“That’s a good call. Well done. Alright, how can we get in again?”

“I snuck about earlier and opened one of the larger windows,” said Cap. “We can go in through that.”

“Let’s not waste time then.”

They moved. Urgency lent them speed and Lavellan kept an eye on Vergala, waited for any signals of danger, but so far, none came. They hitched a ride on a wagon manned by a contact from the thieves’ guild and alighted a few blocks away from the docks, navigating the narrow back alleys with Cap and Knife in the lead.

Solas’ stare burned at the back of his neck. Lavellan shoulders tensed the more time passed.

“Do you mind?” Lavellan hissed at him, voice low enough that the others couldn’t hear ahead of them.

“What?” he bit out.

“I can feel your disapproving stare burning the back of my head.”

“It was not disapproval.”

“Either enlighten me or cut it out.”

“You need to calm yourself,” said Solas. “I have not seen you this rattled before. I fear you will make unwise decisions.”

“Apparently that’s all I’m capable of making lately,” Lavellan muttered.

“Why did you come here?” asked Solas. “To what end?”

“I didn’t know either, but I guess I wanted to see for myself. Hearing about it isn’t the same as being within it. And even now, I don’t know the true extent of what everyone here is going through. I know I can never understand, so all I can do is offer what assistance I can.”

“To what,” Solas asked again, his tone now biting, “end?”

“To make a difference in someone else’s life, no matter how small,” replied Lavellan, almost in disbelief. “I know we’re working big picture most times, Solas, but not everything we do has to be in service of a great mass of people even though that’s also important. Sometimes the only difference you can make is small, but to the one or two people you’ve helped, it could mean the world to them.”

Solas opened his mouth, cut off by Vergala cawing twice.

“Stop,” Lavellan whispered and they halted, lingering in the alley.

Just in time. A guard walked past the alley. Lavellan squinted at the armour beneath their cloak and shot Solas a look.

“Venatori,” he mouthed and Solas nodded, his lips pressing into a grim line

Well, this just got more dangerous.

Once the guard passed, they continued and soon arrived at the warehouse. There was a ship docked at the port, almost hidden in the darkness of the night, and his stomach clenched. They were going to leave tonight. They had to hurry.

Cap scaled the wall to the window and threw down a rope that had been fashioned into a crude ladder. Lavellan kept an eye out for any more Venatori as the others climbed, and he followed once everyone had gone up. He entered the large, open window onto an upper ledge, and pulled himself up to the thick rafters crossing the ceiling to join the others. They had an entire view of the warehouse from here, foregoing any confusing walls and hallways.

And there, in the largest room, were the eight girls chained to the wall with sacks over their heads. None of them were moving.

Solas cast a muffling spell around them. It would make it harder for the Venatori to hear them, but they still couldn't make too loud of a fuss.

"Sleeping spell?" Lavellan asked.

Solas nodded. "I am unsure as to what manner. It could be imposed with a set duration or it operates locally yet indefinitely, which would require the caster to remain within a restrained distance."

"Cap, were they asleep when you scouted earlier?"

"Yeah."

"Solas, if indefinitely applied, what happens to their bodies?"

"Temporarily placed in a stasis," he answered. "Their body would require no food and no water to survive."

The realisation occurred to them at the same time.

"No food and no water mean less resources used," said Lavellan.

"No complaints of hunger or thirst," agreed Solas.

"So then..." His eyes scoured the area. Venatori guards were scattered about. Three were guarding the entrances and the rest were minding their own business. Only one guard with the prisoners.

"What is the furthest the caster can go from the target?" asked Lavellan.

"This warehouse is not large. It could easily be any one of the guards."

The Venatori mages had different uniforms usually, but everyone here wore the same, not even a staff to give anybody away. Damn it.

"There's the matter of getting the girls out of here," said Knife. "If they're asleep, how can we get them out quietly? There's not enough of us to carry them. Also, breaking those chains won't be quiet. We don't know where the keys are either."

Lavellan's gaze scoured the warehouse. He needed a plan that wouldn't get these four killed.

"What should we do, hahren?" asked Knife.

“We should just charge in,” hissed Scruffy.

“Absolutely not,” Lavellan said. “These guards belong to a Tevinter supremacist group called the Venatori. The moment they realise they’re in trouble, they’ll kill the girls and run out of here.”

That quelled any more foolish ideas of attacking them head-on.

Unless.

Lavellan looked at Solas. He was surveying the warehouse below with a slight frown, gaze darting from guard to guard, perhaps attempting to locate the caster for the sleeping spell.

“Can you block the room that the girls are in using a barrier?” asked Lavellan.

He paused, considering Lavellan. “Yes,” he said, “but I find myself worrying more about what you are planning.”

“Nothing that’ll get me in trouble with Josie.”

There was one guard in the room with the girls. If they could be incapacitated, Merry Band of Four could sneak in and break the chains. If Solas erected barriers in specific hallways, it would block the rest of the Venatori from coming to kill them and buy the others enough time to get the girls out through the back door.

“Lethallin, you were in trouble the moment you left that dismal note.”

“You wound me, Solas.”

Lavellan could also funnel the Venatori to him. Make a loud enough commotion and noise that would drown out the others’ attempts to free the prisoners.

He eyed Solas. How strong had he gotten?

“Know any hexes?” he asked.

Solas paused, maybe mulling over the repercussions of admitting that he practices the branch of entropy.

“I may know of a few,” he finally said.

Lavellan counted the guards. Cap’s report was correct. “On fifteen at once?”

Solas stared at him. “So you have faith in my aptitude but not in my person?”

“I never said that,” he said. “Just because some of our views clash doesn’t mean I have no faith in you. Why do you always have to take such extreme stances?”

“Just because it is diametric to yours does not mean it is extreme. I also do not understand why you go through such great pains to move me from my supposed extreme stance when you hypocritically remain steadfast in yours.”

“I’m sorry,” he said in disbelief. “Would you rather I give up on you?”

Solas scowled. “I am not another of your causes. You have no need to fight for me.”

Yes I do, were the words that had built on his tongue, but Lavellan swallowed them back.

“Do not reduce me to that,” said Solas, eyes and voice steely. “I am capable of making my own choices and living with the consequences.”

Lavellan’s stomach wrung and his chest tightened and he bit the inside of his cheeks.

“I’m sure you can,” Lavellan said instead, though it came out bitter, “and I never insinuated otherwise. For someone claiming I have no faith in him, you seem to have little for me in return.”

“Perhaps I have put too much in you instead,” he said. “Peril already falls upon your doorstep every hour. You do not have to go and actively seek it out when it *doesn’t*. Do you fancy yourself an ancient elf? You are not immortal. And neither are these four you have dragged along with you.”

“You certainly have a hell of a way of saying you’re worried. Did we have to go through all that hissing and spitting at each other?”

“I suppose it makes no difference since you will not listen either way.”

“Given up on me already?” Lavellan muttered.

“Is there any use trying to shift you from whatever course you’ve set your eye on?”

“Yes, there’s a use,” he snarled. “I know I don’t always choose the right course. I know I can be terrible. I’m trusting you to knock some sense into me when I do that, not shrug your shoulders and walk off!”

Solas paused.

It was silent save for the shuffling of the Venatori below them.

“You trust me?” Solas asked, voice soft.

Lavellan rubbed his face. “Dread Wolf’s great heaving backside, yes, Solas.” Solas’ face pulled mildly at the curse. “If you’re going to tell me it’s misplaced, save it.”

“Um,” said Knife, “hahrens, the, uh, plan?”

Solas and Lavellan glanced at the four of them and Lavellan almost threw himself off the rafters, had momentarily forgotten they had an audience.

“Yes, the plan,” said Lavellan. “I was going to have Solas stay on the rafters and block the way to the room that the girls are in so you four can get the girls out. Someone needs to incapacitate the one guarding them. While you do that, I’ll distract the rest, funnel them towards me to give you as much time as possible and Solas will help redirect any Venatori headed your way towards me.”

“You’re going to fight them yourself?” asked Scruffy. “By yourself? I thought you said we shouldn’t fight them.”

“I won’t be by myself.” He eyed Solas. “Which is why I’m asking if you can hex multiple people at once. And if you can simultaneously support me. Barriers, enhancements, supporting attacks, whichever. If one of the guards end up being the mage, there’s a chance I’ll eliminate them and the girls can wake up.”

Solas’ brows raised. “Do you plan to work me to the bone tonight?”

“To the marrows,” Lavellan returned and they shared a look. “I’m going to have to ask for

everything you can give.”

Solas looked away. “You are very demanding.”

“If it comforts you, I’ll be working very hard too,” he said dryly. “So, can you?”

“You wish for the full extent of my power?” asked Solas.

“Everything you can manage.”

He glanced at Lavellan, eyes flashing. “Can you handle it?”

“I can.”

“There’re still fifteen of them and one of you,” said Tackle.

Lavellan’s mind cut back to that ruined battlefield, slicing and moving and tearing and leaving a sea of corpses in his wake.

“One of me is more than enough,” said Lavellan. Fifteen was nothing.

“Careful,” said Solas. “I will not enjoy watching you die because of your overblown head.”

“Keep me alive then.” He rolled his shoulders. “Alright, everyone got that?”

They murmured their assent.

“[Ea tel’felasil](#)^[1],” said Solas as Lavellan turned to leave.

“[Garahnen](#)^[2], Solas,” Lavellan said and slipped out the window. He called for Vergala in his head and she arrived, perched on his offered arm. “Get Leliana and tell her I need reinforcements to help stop a slave trafficking operation. Bring covert forces. Did you get that?”

“Slave trafficking. Help Lavellan. Bring covert forces,” she repeated, almost the same pitch as his voice.

“Good girl. Fly fast!” he urged and lifted his arm to give her a boost.

Lavellan descended and unsheathed his daggers, took off his cloak and tied his hair. He encountered a Venatori guard outside and made quick work of them, then kicked open the front doors and let it slam shut, the sound echoing in the mostly empty warehouse.

“Venatori,” he bellowed in greeting and flashed his daggers with a wicked grin. “Good evening. Am I intruding on something?”

“It’s the Inquisitor!”

“For the Elder One!”

Lavellan smashed the flask of fire over himself and Solas’ barrier coated him. But it felt... purer. More concentrated and charged.

He dodged the slashes without trouble. An arrow sailed wide over him.

None of their hits could land. Perfect. Solas’ hex was working, then. Lavellan eliminated them quick.

Five Venatori came. Two archers, two sword wielders—

A fire rune flashed beneath Lavellan.

And one mage.

A harmless force shoved Lavellan out of the way from the sudden stream of fire and another solid force caught and righted him. The air tingled with the familiar sensation of the Veil being pulled, and the Anchor flared briefly. Responding to Solas' magic, perhaps?

The Venatori mage fell in a burst of searing fire.

Lavellan shot the rafters a glance but it was too dark to make out anything.

He licked his lips and tasted lightning from the ambient magic.

Lavellan slipped back into fighting and pierced into the slots of their armour, all his movements fluid, efficient, lethal. Strikes meant for him glanced off the barrier or missed.

More Venatori streamed in. He stopped counting and focused on the fight, his muscles responding easily, his hits turning harder, faster. He tired slower.

His blood sang, warm. Lightning in his veins, on his lips, coasting along his spine, hearkening back to the sensation he'd had during his hunts with Fen'Harel. His attacks turned wild and playful.

A slash. Lavellan evaded. But the strike got lucky and nicked his arm and he appreciated that about as much as Solas did, if the thickening of the ambient magic around him was anything to go by. But the ambient magic didn't hinder him. Rather, it liberated, heightened his senses.

A small twitch of his legs sent him bounding and tearing through the Venatori. His steps were lighter. As if Solas had turned him into a hurricane.

Lavellan vaulted over the shoulders of a Venatori and launched himself at a nearby archer.

They fumbled with nocking the arrow.

He slit their throat.

Solas' magic intensified further and his nerves lit in thrill, energy rippling through him. Lightning coated his lungs.

Well, he did ask for everything.

This wasn't everything.

Something pressed beneath his skin, answering the call of Solas' magic.

And he had enough lucidity in him to recognise that he was getting carried away. Killing was not a game. Lives were not to be toyed with, enemy or otherwise. It should be quick and merciful.

"Vir Tanadhal, first code," he muttered to himself as he ducked a swing. "Strike true and never waver." He plunged his daggers into a Venatori's neck, swivelled on his heel and slashed his daggers across the throat of another who was too close. "Never let prey suffer."

Hilarious. He was invoking Andruil's tenets while wrapped in Fen'Harel's magic.

No, not wrapped. Saturated. It was dripping off him, a thick trickle of lightning, a procession of fire in his blood. Lavellan breathed it in. He muttered the first code of the Vir Tanadhal like a mantra, if only to stop himself from being swept away by Solas.

Five Venatori left. They faltered at the sight of their fallen comrades and Lavellan standing over them.

“Here, I’ll make it easy,” said Lavellan. Hopefully Cap and the rest had gotten the girls out alright. “You yield and I kill you quick. Don’t and we fight, and it’ll be much more tedious for all of us, I’m sure.”

They stared at one another. One jerked his head back and two ran off.

“Hey!” Lavellan called and rushed forward but the three blocked his path. They were headed for the girls. Lavellan cut down the three in his way and chased after the two. Damn it, he should have brought his bow. “Solas!”

A wall of fire cut the Venatori off, which left them no choice but to attack Lavellan.

They didn't get far.

He sheathed his daggers and stalked ahead. Done. But Solas' magic remained thick around him.

He entered the room where the girls were. Two were still chained while four dead Venatori littered the room. Cap looked up from unchaining one girl and nodded at the other. Both were awake, though groggy and disorientated.

Lavellan knelt beside the last girl and forewent any attempts to smile gently, keeping in mind the various unnerved comments his companions had made whenever he'd smiled while covered in blood after the fury of a fight.

“Hello,” he murmured. “My name is Mahanon. I’m here to free you. Do you know your name?”

She blinked at him, eyes foggy, licking her dry and chapped lips. “Arana.”

The butcher’s daughter. “Alright Arana. We’re getting you out of here.”

“You’re... Dalish.”

“Yes.” He caught the keys Cap tossed to him and unlocked her shackles, frowning at the bruised and raw skin around her ankles and wrists. “What do you remember?”

“I... I’m not sure. I was walking home but then...” She scrunched her eyes shut and shook her head. “My head hurts.”

“Can you stand?”

“I’m— not sure.”

“Okay,” he said. “Hold on.” He slipped his arms beneath her knees and under her back and lifted her, held her against him. Cap did the same, strong despite their small frame. Lavellan nodded at the dead Venatori. “They give you trouble?” he asked them.

“They tried,” they said. “Your friend helped. The others are already outside. More friends of yours have arrived too.”

“Good.” Or bad. He was going to find out. He wasn’t certain what kind of lecture Leliana would give him, if she’d give one at all. Hopefully, she hadn’t told Josephine.

Evidently, hope was for idiots. He and Josephine locked eyes the moment he stepped foot outside. Beside her was Leliana, conversing with the scouts and attending to the girls.

Cap frowned at him. “Your friends seem very official.”

“Long story.”

He placed Arana with the other girls. Solas exited the warehouse through the window and took his place beside Lavellan, appraising him with an indiscernible glint in his eyes.

“Thanks,” mumbled Lavellan. “But could you tone it down now, please?”

“You asked for everything.”

“That wasn’t everything.”

He raised a brow. “No?”

“You still held back.”

“Lethallin, if I had given you any more, you would have leapt through the roof.”

Lavellan laughed weakly, the magic around him dwindling like layers of cloth being carefully peeled away until he was made aware of his fatigue and the sting of minor injuries.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Lavellan, wincing at the various aches and throbs.

“Seeing as your opponents were on the ground? Yes, it would have been.” He gave Lavellan a healing potion. Lavellan drank and let Solas pat him down for any injuries, grunted when he pressed against sore areas. Solas had enough mana to spare to heal him.

Lavellan bit at the rim of the potion bottle as he watched the green light of Solas’ magic, teeth scraping against glass. He stared at Solas’ focused look and frowned.

“I’m sorry,” said Lavellan. Solas glanced at him. “For the things I said earlier. They were uncalled for. I don’t think you’re a callous man. If anything, perhaps you care too much.”

He said nothing, only refocused on healing him.

“And,” continued Lavellan. “I’m not fighting for you because you’re a cause. I’m fighting for you because you’re a friend. I owe it to you to try.”

“Why?” Solas asked softly.

“Because you’d do the same.” He looked away. “And I already gave up once.”

Solas finished healing him and he took a step back. The silence between them was a presence more than an absence.

They couldn’t continue their conversation — not that Lavellan had anything else to say — because Josephine marched towards them with murder in her eyes. Leliana followed close behind at a more serene pace, arms behind her back as though this were a stroll through the gardens.

“What were you thinking?” Josephine demanded, dark eyes like coal about to spark. She closed her eyes and took a few steady breaths, and he recognised it as the calming method she'd taught him in his past life. When her eyes opened, they were less murderous, though still livid. “Inquisitor, please,” she implored, “take more care. I understand your desire to help and I will not fault you for it, but please, I *beg* of you. Exercise more care with yourself. And tell us! You do not have to be alone with your campaigns.”

“We beg of you, listen to us. You do not have to fight alone. We are in this fight together, so act as such.”

Cassandra's words echoed and Lavellan looked down, chewed on his lip.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I just— I panicked. I didn't think, and it was reckless of me. I'm sorry.”

Her livid gaze softened into something kinder. “They say you took on most of the guards yourself to protect the others but why do you never think of yourself for once? Why did you not wait for reinforcements?”

“I saw the ship docked. They were going to move out tonight,” he said. “Like I said, I panicked.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” cried Scruffy as he approached. He pointed at Lavellan. “*He's* the Inquisitor?”

Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. “Surprise?”

He gave a disbelieving laugh, almost sounded as if he was close to crying. “And all this time, I thought you didn't give a shit about us.”

Lavellan flinched minutely, couldn't stop it in time, and his grip tightened around the empty potion bottle. Solas placed a gentle hand on Lavellan's back and Leliana swept in, had likely picked up on it as well.

“I found this letter on the guard outside,” she said and handed it to Lavellan. He read it and his breath hitched. “They were for a man named Vicinius.”

“Meant to be shipments for Calpernia in a few months,” he murmured as he read the rest of the letter. “*Our* Calpernia?”

She nodded. “I do not think she ordered this operation, but this was undertaken to fulfill the request for slaves she'd made. She specifically requested for them to not be mistreated.” Hence the sleeping spell. “It may not have been your intention tonight, but we've thwarted the Venatori once more.”

Lavellan sighed and ran his hands through his hair, took out the tie and let his sweat cool.

“Alright, let's make sure the girls are alright and then we'll bring them home.”

Leliana nodded, opened her mouth to make another remark but—

“Well, what's this?” asked a new voice and Lavellan glanced up. “You are a little too early for the party, Inquisitor Lavellan.”

Briala walked into the alley, cutting an imposing shadow beneath the moonlight, eyes glimmering, face absent of her trademark mask. Behind her was a small retinue of masked elves. Lavellan placed the empty bottle on a nearby crate, met her halfway and bowed his head slightly.

“Ambassador Briala,” he greeted. “I hope there hasn’t been a conflict of interest?” Perhaps Briala really was onto the case.

“There would have been,” she said, “but I feared I was too late. Admittedly, your presence has offered some small relief.” She glanced behind him at the girls and her lips pressed into a thin line. “Are they unharmed?”

He nodded. “So far. They’re recovering from a sleeping spell.”

“Many things can still be done to hurt and degrade them, even under a sleeping spell,” she muttered and he gritted his teeth at the thought.

Lavellan looked back at the girls. The gravity of the situation had kicked into them and they wept, comforted by one another. Tackle held onto his sister, rocking her, shoulders heaving as he buried his weeping face into her hair. Lavellan’s nails dug into his palms from how hard he was clenching them.

“Did you make them pay?” asked Briala.

“I did,” he said.

“Good.” She turned to the elves behind her and nodded. They left, disappeared into the shadows. She turned her attention back to the four elves Lavellan had helped. “Eshani,” she called and his brows raised. That was Cap’s name.

Cap looked up with a grim look and stood in front of Briala with their head bowed.

“You were supposed to be preparing for tomorrow night,” Briala chided.

“I couldn’t just leave it alone,” they argued.

Briala sighed. Tonight was a night of reprimands, it seemed. Still. Lavellan blinked at Cap. They were Briala’s agent?

“Don’t give me that look,” they huffed. “You didn’t tell us you were the Inquisitor.”

“Didn’t seem like important information at the time.”

“Well then, my reasons are the same.”

He shrugged. “Well, you *were* quite observant. I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“I suppose the Inquisition will now be a name hailed in the slums of Halamshiral,” said Briala. “Quaint.”

Lavellan shook his head. “No. We can’t take credit for this.”

“What?” asked Solas.

“No, hear me out. We can’t let word get out to the Venatori that it was the Inquisition who stopped this. I can’t have them being wary. We need them complacent.” He crossed his arms. “You take credit for this.” Lavellan looked at Leliana in question and she nodded.

“He’s right,” she said. “We’re also currently investigating into Calpernia. If she remains unsuspecting of the Inquisition’s influence, we can continue on the trail we have.”

Briala hummed in consideration. "Alright," she said. "I'll see what I can do. You want to hide your trail, is what you're saying?"

"Yes," he said. "Also, the Inquisition was never meant to be dragged into this in the first place. This was my own short-sightedness."

She laughed. "Inquisitor, whatever you do, it will relate back to the Inquisition. You are the Inquisition as far as anybody is concerned." She eyed him, then turned. "Walk with me," she said and went on ahead without waiting for his answer. Lavellan shot his advisors and Solas a glance and signalled for them to wait and tend to the others, then followed Briala. Vergala perched herself on his shoulders and he rubbed the underside of her beak.

"Well done," he said. Briala turned in question but saw he was talking to a bird instead.

"Should I ask?"

He grinned. "You can, if you want."

"Full of mysteries, are you?"

"Am I?" he fired back and fell into step beside her as they walked the length of the old docks, water from the river littered with moonlit refractions. "I'm sure you know a few things about me already."

"I know Gaspard has invited you to the ball as a sorry and childish attempt to stir up trouble."

"He wanted us to wear this ugly fucking uniform. Colours were disgusting. I had them changed. Should be interesting to see his reaction tomorrow night."

Briala smiled. "Take your small victories," she agreed. "That should irk him enough, but he'll have to be polite. It wouldn't do him good to attack the guests he's brought in. His strange sense of honour won't let him either." She snorted. "A man with a chevalier's code who treats elves like dirt and potential invaders."

"If he keeps going like that, I'm sure the potential invaders will become actual invaders."

"Are you declaring war, Inquisitor?"

"Absolutely not," he said. "Creators, I'm still dealing with an ancient darkspawn magister who wants to slit your pretty Empress' neck." He shrugged. "Merely a thought."

"A thought," she echoed. "I see."

"So, Ambassador? What do you know about me?"

"I know that you are a very peculiar man," she said, appraising him. She stopped walking and so did he. "Why are you here tonight, Inquisitor? Shouldn't you be up in the High Quarters luxuriating with the nobles?"

"I'd go mad," he said. "And I know my advisors meant for it to be a kindness, but I didn't appreciate them keeping me locked up there. No matter how hard anybody tries, ornate walls can never hide the slums. I'm here tonight because I wanted to see how our people were being treated and I've gotten my answer."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "*Our* people?"

He tilted his head. "Our people," he agreed.

"Is this an attempt to garner sympathy for your cause, Dalish? Declaring the city elves as yours? The very elves your people have renounced?"

His lips twitched. "You sound like my friend. Yes, I know some Dalish don't consider the city elves as theirs, thought they've turned their backs on elven culture, but some disagree. I'm among them."

"The Dalish I met were proud and arrogant. I have helped them for so long,, believing them to be my people, only to find out that they do not view me the same way. Flat-ear," she said, smiled without mirth.

"I can't speak for all of the Dalish," he said, "but I still sincerely apologise. I'm sorry you were treated in that manner. Thank you for your efforts."

A strange look crossed her face and she looked away. "You would really claim to hold different views of the city elves?"

"I do. And I can show you my sincerity."

"Do elaborate."

He looked out at the river, frowning. "I can give you the throne. Tomorrow night."

She stared. Then laughed. "Inquisitor, I cannot sit on the throne. Orlais will be thrown into chaos if a *knife-ear* sits upon it."

"I'm giving you the throne. Not to sit on. I'm giving you whoever sits on it." Lavellan gave her a grim and determined stare. "However the night ends, whether it's Celene or Gaspard or an old dowager with a proclivity for taxidermy who sits on the throne, I'll give you the leash or their ear. I can't help the elves of Orlais, not on my own. But you? You care. I need someone who cares. For the Dalish and city elves alike. It's a thankless job, but I know you've accepted that long ago."

Briala scrutinised him, eyes glinting in assessment.

He shrugged. "Don't trust the declarations I've just said. It's all empty for now. But tomorrow night, we'll see which way the wind blows. The elves will win, no matter who takes the throne."

It was silent between them. Briala looked out towards the river too, wind swaying the dark curls of her hair. She made a soft noise and let it fill the interim.

"Celene made grand promises too," she said and her gaze hardened. "What do I have to remind me of it? The blackened ashes of Halamshiral's slums. If you turn out to be exactly like Celene, Inquisitor..." She fixed him with a stare akin to the silent slice of an unseen dagger. "The morning after you save the world from this darkspawn magister, you will find yourself ruined."

Lavellan considered the threat, then nodded.

"Good," he said. If he did indeed turn out to be exactly like Celene, he'd turn his dagger on himself and bury it in his gut first.

They walked back to the others. As they did, Lavellan's mind turned and weighed his options.

The others glanced up upon their return and Briala slipped away with a soft farewell laden with

promise and warning. Lavellan stared up at the stars in silence. His advisors and Solas watched him with an unsaid question.

“I think,” he said, eyes glimmering, “that I’m letting Celene die tomorrow night.”

Chapter End Notes

Solas and Lavellan: *arguing quietly with a giant cloud of suffocating UST and Angst around them*

Merry Band of Four:

They really do forget everyone else in the room when they get started huh?

Lavellan, baby, you're going to give the inner circle grey hairs.

Solas: u reckless punk u think ur an ancient elf huNH???

Lavellan:

Lavellan: ya

Translation

[1] **Ea tel'felasil:** Don't be foolish^[1]

[2] **Garahnen:** Everything^[1]

The empire to one's whims

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

bold in the black and gold—

“I’m giving the throne to Briala.”

His three advisors digested the information. The bright sunlight that was flooding the estate's solarium shone over their solemn faces.

“You’d still have to give Gaspard the throne for that to happen,” said Cullen, frowning. “Even if you do succeed with giving the ambassador blackmail, how long will that last? I’ve no wish to see him declare war on Ferelden once this is over.”

“It does seem a little counterintuitive,” said Josephine. “You could attain the same results with reuniting Empress Celene with Ambassador Briala.” Lavellan scrunched his face. “Better yet, we could arrange a public truce.”

Leliana said nothing, only examined the variety of exotic plants arrayed along the large windows.

“What we need is for Orlais to be stable,” he said. “That doesn’t require Celene being alive.”

“A public truce will work,” Leliana said, brushing her fingers against the curling vine of an overhead potted plant. “Momentarily, at least.” She turned and faced him. “But you are thinking long-term, yes? You have further plans after the masquerade and, optimistically, after Corypheus.”

Josephine and Cullen stared at him. The clouds obscured the sun, dousing them with blessed shade. Lavellan leaned back in his seat and didn’t answer.

Leliana smiled. “I had not taken you for a schemer.”

“Yes you have,” said Lavellan.

“Not something of this political magnitude. I must admit, I am surprised.”

“I won't drag the Inquisition with me,” said Lavellan. “Whatever plans I have after Corypheus—” and after Solas, if there *was* an after— “I won’t involve the Inquisition as an organisation. Although, for now, I’m using our influence to give me this early foundation.”

“What *are* you planning after?” asked Josephine.

Lavellan looked down at his lap. “I want to return the Dales and Arlathan back to the elves.”

Nobody said anything for a long time.

“That is a big promise,” Josephine murmured.

“I know.”

The clouds passed and the sunlight returned.

“Are you certain?” asked Leliana. “About letting Empress Celene die?”

“I am,” he said, determination hardening his voice.

Josephine clasped her hands over the table. “Well, our objective is to stabilise Orlais. If that is the course you wish to take...”

“Does it discomfort you?” he asked.

“Mildly,” she admitted. “But I trust your judgement.”

Lavellan bit back a grimace.

“We will have to take precautionary measures,” said Cullen and he rubbed the back of his neck. “To mitigate the chaos after the Empress’... assassination. Whenever it will happen. I’m still uncomfortable with the thought of Grand Duke Gaspard on the throne, but if you think the elven ambassador can hold onto the leash you give her...”

His brows raised. “You three really trust me that much?”

“Is that so surprising?” asked Cullen. “We swore to fight for you, Inquisitor.”

“I can lead you astray,” said Lavellan. “I don’t—I don’t want to be another Meredith.”

Cullen shook his head. “I am not the same man as I was then. I follow you, but not blindly.”

“Good. If I ever make choices that you think compromises your morals, oppose me.”

Cullen nodded, grim but firm.

“Shall we inform the inner circle?” asked Josephine.

“No,” said Lavellan. “The less who know, the better. It’s not that I don’t trust them, but it’s easy to slip. It’s safer this way. For them, too.” Although, it was a little late for Solas, but he’d spent centuries in courts. It would be fine. He was unlikely to slip. Besides, Lavellan had already declared in the Emerald Graves that he was planning to put Briala on the throne, so it would be no large surprise for Solas.

“Well then, it is time to start preparing for the ball,” said Josephine. They concluded the meeting and stood. Josephine and Cullen left, but Leliana stayed, watching Lavellan with a considering frown.

“Is everything alright?” he asked. “Do you disagree?” Though he vaguely recalled that it was Leliana who’d suggested that they could let Celene die last time.

“No. In fact, I think it shrewd. I just... did not expect such ruthlessness from you.”

He paused.

She shook her head. “No, never mind. Come, let us prepare.”

Leliana ushered him out of the solarium and back into the estate, but the troubled look never left her face.

He looked out his bedroom window. The grounding stone in his hand had warmed from how long he'd held and gripped it. His stomach flipped. Whether from anticipation or the anxiety from the wait, he couldn't be sure.

Lavellan glanced at the covered mannequin standing beside his wardrobe. They'd been adamant about keeping the uniform a secret until the very end, and he finally understood why once he pulled the fabric away to reveal it.

He ran disbelieving fingers over the attire, traced the golden embroidery of ferns and curling vines on the front of the black military coat, a black braided design threaded along the coat's golden trims. The uniform had stayed somewhat true to Gaspard's original design but this was different. Better. *Theirs*. The sash was gone but they'd kept the belt, though the buckles were now in the shape of the Inquisition's symbol.

He raised a brow at the one-shouldered cape, the fabric smooth and shimmering gold. That was new.

"Madame Vivienne and Madame Sartre, you've outdone yourselves," he said. Such small changes that spoke volumes.

You cannot tame me.

Lavellan dressed himself and marvelled at the flexibility of the attire. Even as he picked up his daggers and ran through a few forms, he moved uninhibited. The old uniforms had been stiff, had restricted his movements and left him frustrated for the entirety of the night, but this presented no such issues.

For the finishing touch...

He retrieved a small case on his bedside table and opened it, a little something he'd requested months prior to be made.

"I saw a woman wearing this accessory on her ears," said Lavellan. "During the ball. It was on the outer shell of it."

Dorian hummed as he looked up from his book. "Oh, yes. Ear cuffs. Never really was one for them."

"If I were to wear them, don't you think my ears would look like knives?"

He paused, stared at Lavellan over the book.

"Next time," continued Lavellan, "I'll wear it to court."

The sentiment rang hollow since their confrontation with Solas would happen in three days, but he always did enjoy wry humour.

Dorian closed the book, smiling faintly. "Well then! I wish to see it when you do."

"It's a promise."

"You better uphold it."

The silver ear cuffs glinted as Lavellan clipped them on. It hugged the skin, secure but not biting,

reaching to the tip but no further, and he smiled.

He was right. They looked like knives.

If they were to call him knife-ear behind his back, he may as well give them reason to.

Lavellan stood in front of the mirror, the golden fabric of the cape swishing as he moved. The uniform fit him well; balanced formal with militaristic, balanced embellished with simple, elegance with danger. The light caught on the silver ear cuffs.

He traced the fern embroidery on the front, the gold of it striking.

“It would also match the colour of your eyes.”

He pursed his lips and looked away. Stupid wolf.

Someone knocked on his door. “Inquisitor?” came Vivienne’s imperious voice. “May I come in?”

“It’s open,” he said.

Vivienne swept into the room, wearing the same uniform, but absent of the cape, and the embroidery was limited to the cuff of the sleeves. Complex, golden lacework covered the surface of her black hennin.

She stopped once she saw him, an approving light sparking in her eyes.

“Darling, you look wonderful,” she greeted and walked up to him, resting her hands on his shoulders as they regarded his reflection.

“As do you,” he said and she smiled. She stepped away with a hand to her chin as she better appraised him, and her gaze softened as it fell on the silver ear cuffs.

Vivienne gently cupped the side of his head, thumb brushing over the accessory. “Well done,” she said. “They cannot hurt you this way.”

He smiled. “I want them unnerved.”

“And they will be. Now you must ensure you keep their attention despite it. A careful balance of enigma and fear.”

“He laid such beautiful traps in the forest.”

“Did you know,” said Lavellan out of the blue, “that there was once a hunter who would make traps that were said to be so beautiful that those who fell to it welcomed it, even at the price of death?”

Vivienne retracted her hand and tilted her head in curiosity. “Is this an elven tale?”

“In a way,” he said and fought to keep his voice neutral. “The god of tricks heard about this trap and sought the hunter, wondering what made them so compelling. The hunter challenged him to a hunt. The trickster god was to chase the hunter, and when he catches the hunter, he will know the answer.”

“When,” noted Vivienne.

“When,” he confirmed. “And so the chase began, lasting throughout the night until, inevitably, the

god caught the hunter.”

“And what was the secret to his traps?”

“It was left open-ended.” He shrugged. “I say it was the illusion of victory which made the traps compelling.”

“And you will lay such a trap?” she asked and Lavellan smiled.

“Madame Vivienne, I am the trap.”

A delicate laugh escaped her. “You *are* a terror, darling.”

What would the god of tricks think of him now?

Vivienne ran her hands through his washed hair and frowned. “What were you planning to do with it?”

“I was just going to leave it. Or tie it maybe.”

She made a displeased sound at the back of her throat. “I’m certain you know what you’re doing with your—” she vaguely gestured at it— “bird nest.” He laughed. “But surely you could do something better with it.”

“It’s too short to style into the only braid I know, but I suppose it’s gotten long enough that I can’t just leave it alone.”

The sound of chatter from downstairs. His companions must already be dressed.

“I think I may have a solution,” she said. “Wait here.”

She left and Lavellan grabbed a hair tie and wrapped it around his wrist, just in case, before he took his grounding stone and slipped it into an inner pocket. He rarely had need for it now but it offered comfort nonetheless.

Vivienne returned with a small vial and a comb.

“Is that Cullen’s?” asked Lavellan, eyeing the vial.

“Who else’s? He numbers among the few of you that bother to spend more than a sparing glance at their hair.” She patted the bed. “Sit.”

Lavellan obliged as she poured the vial’s contents onto her fingers before lathering it over the teeth of the comb and sweeping his hair back with it. Miraculously, his hair stayed. Somewhat. It wasn’t as stubborn as Ellana’s but it still had an inclination to disobey some days. Once finished, he glanced at his reflection.

He made a face. Too... neat.

“Patience,” she said. “I’m not finished.” Vivienne carded her hands through the locks and ruffled them, turned it unkempt, gave it a dash of disorder. “There,” she said, moved a few more strands. “Your wildness cannot be tamed. Shouldn’t be. Although it never hurts to look presentable and place effort into looking effortless.”

“Is that what you do?” he asked, grinning, better approved of the modification.

“Darling,” she cooed, “I always look effortless. I need not place effort into a natural talent.”

“Ah, of course. My sincerest apologies.”

“Hm. Forgiven.” She stood and ushered him out the door. “Come, let us show you off.”

He snorted. “They see me almost every day. There’s no need.”

They approached the staircase, his friends already gathered in the foyer below them, a sea of black and gold.

Vivienne clapped her hands. “Settle, rabble. Come see your Inquisitor.”

There rose a collection of cheers and a playful whistle from Bull as they descended the stairs. Lavellan looked for the source of the whistle on instinct, and his eyes accidentally locked onto Solas, who was standing beside Bull. Lavellan averted his gaze, heartbeat spiking.

Dorian met him at the bottom of the steps and bowed with great exaggeration. “Dear Maker, if this is you rewarding me for being a pious man, then I will continue to kiss your holy light.” He took Lavellan’s hand and kissed it. Lavellan rolled his eyes. “Oh demigod descended from above, how you grace our measly existence with your gleaming presence.”

“Shut up,” he laughed and pulled his hand back, smacked Dorian’s arm.

Dorian’s gaze fell on the silver ear cuffs.

Lavellan had worn it to court after all.

“Like it?” Lavellan asked. *Look, see? I finally managed to keep a promise.*

Too bad it was to a dead man.

“Like it?” Dorian straightened and laughed nervously. “I’m a little uneasy all of a sudden. I feel as if I’ve walked into a trap.”

He patted Dorian’s arm, brushed aside the vertigo and aching in his chest. “Good.” Lavellan took stock of his companions to redirect his attention, steered clear of looking at Solas. “We look fantastic. And terrifying. This is great.” He couldn’t wait to see Gaspard’s face.

Sera fidgeted in her attire. “Not as itchy as I thought.”

Blackwall’s beard had been braided and threaded with gold, hair tied back, same as Varric. Josephine had pinned her hair up into an elaborate braided bun.

And he finally mustered enough courage to look at Solas.

Solas was leaning against the wall, arms crossed and appraising Lavellan, making no effort to conceal it. The slow travel of his gaze traced a careful knife over Lavellan’s chest, stripped the layers of flesh and bone back as if it were delicate lacework, spun the trickling blood into a thread that he wrapped around Lavellan’s shuddering heart.

Lavellan tore his gaze away because that way lay danger. His mouth dried.

“Inquisitor, please,” begged Dorian, gesturing at the hat that Solas was holding. “Tell Solas that he may *not* wear that dreadful helm to the party.”

Lavellan shrugged, placed more effort into making it seem casual. “I bet the helm is a subtle dig at the Orlesian nobility. Let him.”

Dorian made a withering sound.

“On the subject of strange attire,” said Lavellan and held up the one-shouldered cape. “Is this really necessary?”

“It is the only part of your attire that has been treated with the alchemical reagent you use,” said Josephine with a playful smile. “It is also detachable.”

Lavellan stared at her. Then at the cape. Detachable? So... if he were to throw it at the face of an unfortunate Venatori or a particularly irritating noble and set it alight...? He smoothed the cape back over his shoulder and patted it.

“Oh, yes. Needed. Very much so,” he agreed.

Josephine clapped. “Alright, we must be going. The window of fashionably late is very precise and very fickle.”

“Impossible to be fashionably late when we're the ones who start the party,” said Dorian.

Everybody filed out the door, chattering about the outfits or things to look forward to or matters of complaint. Cullen already looked as if he was battling a huge headache.

“We’re not at the palace yet, Commander,” teased Lavellan.

“And yet the headache has already arrived.”

“Try to save some headache for the actual event.”

“I think I’m incapable of running out.”

“Good man.”

Their four coaches were arrayed outside, sleek and black, ornamented with golden accents — matched their uniforms. Blackwall and Bull would ride on horseback as honour guards. Lavellan was to ride alone in the first carriage.

“Why must I ride alone again?” he grumbled.

“It would not hurt to be theatrical,” said Solas, suddenly beside him, and Lavellan almost leapt out of his skin. “So you and only you will be the first sight they see. And what a sublime sight that would be, too.”

Lavellan couldn’t quite suppress the warmth in his chest and the jump in his heart.

“Flatterer,” he said.

“It was not flattery. Merely an observation.”

Lavellan stole a glance at him. Or perhaps it was more than a glance. He couldn’t be sure of the duration. The uniform complemented the natural elegance of Solas’ fluid movements, shifted his disposition some, changed how he held himself. Nothing overt. Subtle, hidden, the flash of too sharp teeth in the sheep’s mouth. Made one wonder if it was a trick of the light.

It was not.

“Admiring, Inquisitor?” Solas asked after a while and Lavellan realised he’d been staring.

“Observing,” he returned.

Solas smiled, gaze on the coaches rather than Lavellan, still evading eye contact.

“Ah. And what have you observed?”

“That perhaps it is you I should be wary of tonight.”

His smile sharpened. “Why is that?”

Lavellan watched the others entering their carriages. “Because there’s something entirely delighted in your eyes and I suspect it has something to do with the hat,” he lied smoothly. “What obscure historical reference are you making now?”

“A challenge for you,” Solas said. “Find out.”

He laughed. “Of course. I’ll add it to my itinerary for tonight. It’s a little full but I’m sure I can sneak it in.”

“Excellent.” With that, he walked towards his carriage and Lavellan was left to enter his on his lonesome. He huffed once inside.

“Aw, what’s wrong?” asked Bull outside his window, grinning at Lavellan. “Didn’t get a compliment from a certain bastard?”

“No,” said Lavellan. “I was thinking about the ball, actually.”

“Sure you were.”

“You don’t believe me? We’re kind of going into a ball where an assassination attempt is about to happen. On the empress, no less.”

Bull shrugged, mounting his horse. “Don’t worry. The moment he saw you, he stopped dead mid-sentence. Mid-sentence, Mercy. Couldn’t stop staring. Keep at it. You just stand there and let me coax the guy. Who knows? Tonight might end up being a good night.” He winked. But he had an eyepatch so... He could have just been blinking? No, the blink was too deliberate. Definitely winking. “You know how these things end.”

“With low sobriety and a headache.”

“I’d gear for a different kind of head aching.”

Lavellan snapped the curtains shut and ignored Bull’s bellowing laughter. The carriages soon moved and off they went towards the heart of this rotting empire. Too many rotting empires in his lifetime. This life and the past. Both pasts.

Creators, what a mess.

He was too old for this.

The Winter Palace held a surplus of unwanted and unpleasant memories. No Exalted Council this time, and hopefully no explosives planted by a foreign power, but the peace talks on their own had

been an unlikeable affair.

They arrived far too soon.

“Ready, Inquisitor?” came Blackwall’s voice from outside along with the ambient chatter of the courtiers that had gathered in the Winter Palace’s front courtyard. Lavellan took a deep breath and donned on his figurative mask.

“Ready,” he said.

The door opened and Lavellan stepped out, greeted the palace’s front gates with an unmoved disposition despite the squeeze in his chest at the familiar yet simultaneously foreign sight. Grand Duke Gaspard was waiting beyond the gates. The Inquisition soldiers stood at silent attention, garbed in black. Once the full retinue of the inner circle was standing behind him, they entered the palace grounds with him at the helm.

They must have made quite the foreboding entourage. Their black attires stood in stark contrast to the sea of colours littering the party.

The whispers began.

The familiar front courtyard pulled memories from the dusty corners of his mind. He almost half-expected Varric to be waiting by the fountains with his disgruntled seneschal lecturing him, Cullen in a corner stroking his drooling Mabari, Dafty.

A dead Qunari by the wall.

Stop it. Focus.

Lavellan confronted Grand Duke Gaspard with an amiable smile. He had no time to be shaken. If the Orlesians caught even the slightest whiff of hesitance from him, he’d be in trouble.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” greeted Gaspard. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.” He paused and appraised everyone’s attire, expression remaining neutral, though his eyes sharpened behind the mask. “You take pride in your colours,” he said.

“Of course,” said Lavellan, tone easy. “Our organisation has accomplished much to be proud of. Besides, if you wished to stir up controversy by having us as your guests, I supposed you could use a little helping hand.”

Gaspard’s expression tightened. No matter how much the mask hid, Lavellan knew to read from the eyes. The eyes never lied.

“It certainly has,” said Gaspard. “Recruiting the Grey Wardens, and both the Templars and rebel mages into your ranks while fostering peace between them? A clever move. What’s more, such a vocal support the Chantry now gives. Such a change of heart. Perhaps your reach truly stretches further than believed possible.”

Good try, bastard. Such implications wouldn’t fly over Lavellan’s head. Not on his watch.

“Though leaderless, the Chantry is still a powerful and decisive institution. Whatever action they take is beyond our influence, and such a change of heart is a rather strong testament to how far we’ve come to earn their trust.” *Elevate the Chantry, imply Gaspard had little faith in them, and put Lavellan in the good graces of the faithful.*

“Truly impressive,” said Gaspard, shifting tactics. That way lay trouble and they both knew that his continued pursual of it would give Lavellan the shovel to bury him with. “Imagine what further glories the Inquisition could achieve with the full support of the rightful Emperor of Orlais!”

“Which one is the rightful one again?” asked Lavellan with a perfected look of innocent curiosity. “I always forget.”

Gaspard chuckled but it was forced at the edges. “If you’re lucky, you’ll find him by the drinks. Probably near the brandy.” He bowed. “Enjoy the masquerade, Inquisition. Let us meet again once you are ready for your introduction to the court. In the meantime, if you will excuse me.” Gaspard retreated inside and Lavellan turned to the inner circle.

“Well done,” said Leliana, brows raised slightly.

“You look surprised, Sister Nightingale,” he teased. “No faith in my skills?”

“I had faith, Inquisitor,” she said. “And yet I still find myself pleasantly surprised.”

“I’m not entirely sure what just happened,” admitted Cullen.

“Hush,” soothed Leliana. “Just stand and look pretty.”

Cullen scowled at her.

Lavellan nodded at the others. “You know what to do.”

They went on ahead, Cole throwing Lavellan a considering look over his shoulder, before he fell into step beside Solas. Lavellan watched Solas walking away for far longer than was necessary.

He shook his head. “Alright, scatter. Gather what you can here. Commander, please ensure the safety of our *effects*.”

Now then. Lavellan regarded the front courtyard, met the looks of a few nobles whose support he'd already gathered before the ball. This was the first battle. Enduring all those excruciating meetings was finally paying off.

“An elf savage?” he heard one man ask, scandalised.

“This must be Gaspard’s idea of a joke.”

It was, but Gaspard would soon realise that the Inquisition and its Inquisitor was anything but a joke. By the end of tonight, Lavellan would have him leashed and he would give the leash to Briala. So perhaps this *was* a joke. Just at Gaspard’s expense.

By the end of tonight, Orlais would choke on Lavellan’s strings and they would thank him for it.

The allies they'd made before the ball would turn the tide of the rumours to the Inquisition’s favour, but Lavellan must continue to provide them with the ammunition to do so. His first conversation with Gaspard would have won the slight approval of those who considered him usurper more than rightful ruler, and so, Lavellan would later need something to garner the approval of those who supported Gaspard. Excelling at the Game was his best chance of doing so.

Josephine introduced him to a few nobles and he left them charmed yet vaguely uneasy after every conversation. A skill he'd learned in Tevinter.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” said Josephine once their conversation with a comte ended.

He kept his ear on the conversation between two nobles by the garden bed. "Commander Cullen would bemoan losing a possible ally who would share his hatred of the Grand Game."

"I'm sure we can bond over other things," said Lavellan with an entirely too pleased grin. "By the way, Gaspard's losing traction with some of his supporters."

She blinked. "What makes you say this?"

He tipped his head slightly towards the direction of the two nobles. "A breeze whispered by my ear."

Josephine held a hand up to her chin in thought as she eyed him. "And to think that two nights ago you came home looking like a lost alley cat."

His mouth fell open in affront.

"I must admit, I had entertained a few worst-case scenarios and readied contingency plans," she said and he let out a startled laugh, "but you are being very behaved tonight."

"Give me some time. I'll misbehave soon."

Josephine chuckled, shaking her head. "If you must, please ensure the misbehaviour makes the Orlesians intrigued over horrified."

"Why not both?"

She sighed, but she was still smiling, and stood. "Come, let us go in. You still have the rest of the palace to greet and I dearly hope our dancing lessons are put to good use."

He grinned. "Jo, you sat on the sidelines and cheered me on and laughed when I stepped on the instructor's feet. I would hardly constitute them as your lessons."

"Such insult, Inquisitor Lavellan," she retorted, but it was absent of heat. They stood and waited by the palace entrance for Leliana and Cullen while Josephine watched the skies. Clear skies tonight. The stars giggled as they sat in on tonight's gala. Vergala should already be perched on rooftops and balconies, ready should Lavellan or the Inquisition soldiers require her help.

Cullen returned first.

"Solas has gone on ahead to ready the caches," he said. "Sera's contacting Red Jenny. The rest of the inner circle are at their stations."

"Do you think Solas and Sera would have finished by now?"

"Likely. It shouldn't take more than half an hour."

Leliana met up with them, terribly pleased with herself. "I believe we just earned the support of four houses."

"Seven," corrected Lavellan. "Brienne, Langer, and Marcelin from me and Jo."

"And the first moon has yet to rise past its mid-zenith." She smiled. "My, my, we *are* efficient. There are mixed rumours of you, Inquisitor."

"Oh? Do tell me about them later. On a scale of Chantry sister caught wearing lacy smallclothes to participating in an orgy for a blood magic ritual, how sordid are these rumours?"

Cullen made a disagreeing noise and Josephine coughed behind her hand. Leliana's smile widened.

"I will inform you over a bottle of Nevarran Red later. For now, shall we announce our presence to the rest of the palace?"

"Let's," he said. "The inner circle should be back in the vestibule for the formal introductions." Lavellan paused. "I hope Sera hasn't already stained her uniform."

"Is it too late to change her name?" Josephine muttered.

"Her name is perfect," said Lavellan.

Her face scrunched. They entered the palace vestibule, foreboding in their black and gold, and found the inner circle littered throughout large area. Grand Duke Gaspard was by the door, conversing with two people.

The Inquisition gathered in an unoccupied corner. Sera's uniform had, thankfully, remained pristine. He counted the people present and frowned.

"Where's Solas?" he asked.

Cole fidgeted in his uniform but said nothing and Lavellan squinted further. Was he in trouble? They'd assigned Solas to sort out the weapon caches because of his aptitude for being unassuming, but what if he was in danger? Assigning him to the caches was a new decision. Lavellan hadn't done it in his past life so what if—

"I apologise for my tardiness," came a voice behind him and Lavellan sagged in noticeable relief.

"Cutting it close, Chuckles," said Varric. He'd shaved for tonight and Lavellan wasn't sure how he felt about clean-shaven Varric. "Our dear Inquisitor's worry was increasing exponentially every second."

Lavellan crossed his arms. "I was only moderately worried," he said in his defence and shot Solas a glance. "How'd it go?"

"Successfully," he replied with an easy smile. Lavellan's lips twitched at Solas' hat and he turned away, unsure if he was suppressing a laugh or a remark.

"Sera?" Lavellan asked instead. "Made any new Friends?"

She scrunched her nose. "I did, but they're all fluttery. Something about missing elves."

So it had already begun.

"Anyone else have anything interesting to share?" He was too aware of Solas' presence behind him.

"Got a lot of rumours about us," said Bull. "The usual though. Apparently you eat babies and bed demons, but some say you're actually a very nice, young man. Red is scary, Varric's got fans."

"I do?" asked Varric. "Because of Hightown? Or The Champion?"

"Uh, no. The other one. Something, something, shield?"

"Swords and Shields?" he squawked. "My romance serial? Seriously?"

“Darling, Orlesians love mystery and romance,” said Vivienne. “It should come as no surprise.”

“No, but I’m going to have a few words with my publisher,” he muttered. “Doesn’t sell well my ass.”

Lavellan laughed and nodded towards the ballroom. “Come on, let’s go meet an empress.”

They must have made for such an intimidating sight. Sure, if they had gone with the red uniform, they would still attract attention, but they wouldn’t have carried such weight from the beginning. Wouldn’t have imparted this small touch of fear. Lavellan wasn’t here to play nice. Every word, every action, would be a hidden blade, a subtle string. He would not dance to the Game’s song, but the Game would dance to his.

In another world, in another life, this all felt so familiar...

A flash of violet eyes, a shower of raven feathers, the slow curl of lips dripping with poison.

Lavellan blinked and it was gone.

Gaspard’s conversational partners bowed out upon Lavellan’s approach and Gaspard nodded at him.

“Inquisition,” he said. “Are you prepared to appear as the guests of a hateful usurper?”

“I’m sure we’ll finally bring a little excitement into this entire night.”

Gaspard chuckled. “I share the sentiment. It is a relief to walk in among friends. They number few these days, torn by divided loyalties.”

Lavellan merely smiled. Yes. Friends. Gaspard would certainly sit on the throne tonight, and he would have rule over his precious empire. Though Lavellan expected it wouldn’t turn out how Gaspard had envisioned.

“And as a friend, perhaps there is a matter you could undertake this evening.” Gaspard fixed his cuffs. “This elven ‘ambassador’ Briala... I suspect she intends to disrupt tonight’s negotiations.” Oh definitely. “My people have found these ‘ambassadors’ all over the fortifications. Sabotage seems the least of their crimes.”

His smile sharpened. “I hope you have better evidence than ‘the elves were acting dodgy.’”

“Briala was once Celene’s servant. Until my cousin had her arrested for crimes against the empire to cover up a political mistake.”

A political mistake? Burning Halamshiral’s slums was a fucking *political mistake*? That was goddamn genocide!

“If anyone wishes Celene harm, Inquisitor, it’s that elf. She certainly has reason.”

Lavellan kept his entire posture relaxed and casual. No matter how much he wanted to ball his fists and punch the door.

“Be as discreet as possible,” sighed Gaspard. “I detest the Game, but if we do not play it well, our enemies will brand us as fools and villains.” He gestured at the door. “But we’re keeping the court waiting. Shall we?”

He nodded because if he spoke, he suspected he’d give himself away. Gaspard opened the door.

The music from the orchestra in the ballroom drifted, lazy in the jovial and extravagant atmosphere, threading with the ambient conversations and delicate murmurs. The court herald noted their arrival and they took their places.

Lavellan stopped beside Solas and crossed his arms. "Are you sure about your introduction?" he asked.

"Inquisitor, we have already discussed this at length," Solas said, gaze travelling across the Orlesian ballroom, cataloguing whatever it was he was searching for in his head.

"I know, but..."

"You cannot be unseen tonight," murmured Solas, half in reassurance, half in exasperation because as Solas said, this had already been discussed at *length*. By discussed, it may have also contained a few arguments as was their wont. "Your shadows will be unoccupied so allow me to dwell within them and survey from there as servants are easily overlooked. You are astute, but that does not negate the overwhelming nature of your presence. Many will hesitate to say certain things around you."

"I know," he grumbled.

Solas smiled but it felt entirely patronising. "Then why are we still discussing this?"

"And now presenting," they announced.

Gaspard descended the stairs as his name was called.

"I believe that marks the retirement of this conversation," said Solas.

"I want to retire," Lavellan griped.

"Misery upon misery for our poor Inquisitor."

"Ass."

Solas nudged Lavellan forward at his cue and he huffed, descending the stairs.

"Lord Inquisitor Lavellan," they introduced.

Protocol dictated that he should walk towards the other end of the ballroom so that the empress could receive him, but he stayed and waited, directly across Celene. He kept his stare level, right arm by his side, the left bent and across his torso. Lavellan would walk once everybody in the Inquisition had been announced.

Whispers began anew.

Thus began his inner circle's introductions. He managed to keep a straight face at Sera's, bit back a smile as Cassandra irritably cut off her long name, and clenched his jaw once Solas passed him, introduced as Lavellan's manservant. And still, Lavellan stood. He might be pushing it but no matter. He finally walked once the last of his companions had been introduced.

Lavellan stopped and bowed before the empress. If she disapproved, he couldn't tell due to their distance and the mask, but he recalled that Celene found these affairs dull so he supposed he'd given her something amusing tonight.

Grand Duchess Florianne scrutinised him and their eyes met for a sharp flicker of a second.

Gaspard barrelled on through and forewent civility — not that Celene was having any of that shit. He bowed out after and gave Lavellan a subtle nod. His inner circle excused themselves and so it was just him left, the court's focus shifting to him, thousands of eyes at the back of his neck. He could almost feel the knives hidden up sleeves.

Was that impression from this empire or an ancient, faded one?

They engaged in a conversation brimming with metaphors and double speak, and while Lavellan could keep up with the rhythm of her dance, it still took his entire concentration to do so. Celene was a proficient player of the Game after all. She had to be to earn and keep the throne for this long.

And a small part of him roiled in its frustration because it knew, *knew* that this was child's play and that he was more capable than this. That he could dance with an empress.

That he could dance with the gods.

Lavellan bowed after Celene's dismissal and ascended the steps away from the dance floor, grinding his teeth as if the irritation had coated it and it would vanish if he wore away at it long enough.

Leliana met him at the top of the steps.

"Inquisitor, a word when you finish your business here?" she asked and he nodded. "Meet me at the vestibule."

He let Leliana go and met up with Sera.

"Tits tittering behind their masks," was her greeting when he arrived. "They don't know if they're allowed to like you or not." She grinned and leaned against the side table. "Got a few of them scared too."

"Oh good," he said. "I *am* pretty scary."

"Pft, don't push it. You're an idiot is what you are."

"As the Lady Mai Bhalsych says."

She sniggered.

Vivienne had been averse to Sera's presence, but Lavellan needed her here. Not only because she could contact Red Jenny, but also, he needed her for the same reason that Vivienne had for not wanting her here: she was unapologetically herself. Silliness and all. That was Sera's whole tactic.

As she'd once told him, "They're too busy sniffing at you and turning their noses up to see you'd taken their breeches."

Underestimation was a powerful force to exploit. Underestimation led to complacency.

Complacency led to victory.

Everybody had an important role tonight and he had to play to their talents.

"Watch me make them hate themselves for liking me," he said. "It's going to be a blast."

"You better. I got sovs bet with Varric."

“He bet against me? Ouch.”

She shrugged. “So prove him wrong. I win five sovs. Easy.”

“Only five? Bump it up to ten when you see him later.”

“Your head’s getting big. I’ll kick it.”

“You want to get rich or not?”

Sera grinned, toothy and impish. “Sure I do. Fine. Go nail some nobs then.” She frowned. “Not that kind of nail. How would you even get started? They’re all ruffled up like chickens. You’d fall asleep in it.”

Lavellan laughed.

“I mean, you take the skirt and there’s another skirt,” she continued. “Could crawl under it, I suppose.”

“*No* crawling up people’s dresses!”

“Maybe *you* wouldn’t. You’re in good with ser poncy elven glory bits. Bet he yells it out when he does it too.”

“I’m not in good with anything!”

“What, he in yours then?”

Lavellan wasn’t sure if he was laughing or groaning as he buried his face in his hands. “Nobody’s in— Just— Forget I ever spoke.”

She sniggered and shoved him aside. Lavellan gave her two of his middle fingers and made the rounds in the ballroom, speaking to his advisors and Vivienne. Once he finished, he returned to the vestibule and met up with Leliana.

“Do you think I overstepped earlier when I didn’t walk until all of the Inquisition was announced?” he asked.

She led them to a chaise and perched more than sat on it. “It would depend on who you ask. But it would certainly be taken as you making a statement.” Leliana crossed her legs and tilted her head, eyes sharp. “Or a small rebellion.”

Lavellan answered with a secret smile.

“At any rate, I find myself once again surprised at your... aptitude in court.”

“I had excellent teachers.”

“Of course,” she acknowledged, “but some things cannot be taught. Can only be gained through experience.” Her eyes glimmered and he knew she would dissect his actions tonight, form her conclusions and theories. Or perhaps she already had theories about him. What could they be?

“You’ll find that power dynamics are not limited to noble courts,” he said. “There are plenty of power struggles in Dalish clans. Especially in a clan as large as mine.”

“I see,” she said in a way that signified she did not, in fact, see. Rather, it strengthened her

suspicious. Lavellan let her have them.

“What did you wish to speak to me about?” he asked and redirected the conversation to Morrigan.

Once she imparted her information, he wandered the Guest Wing. Blackwall was in the Hall of Heroes, sitting in the lower levels conveniently away from immediate view. Perfect for picking up conversation between passers-by.

Two elven servants lingered by the entrance to the Guest Wing.

Their gazes met as he approached.

He passed them.

One pressed a piece of paper into his hand and he walked right along, ignored the jump of his heart. Was that new? That had to be new. The elven servants had treated him with caution in his past life. Had Briala told them of the incident at the warehouse last night?

He still sensed a few eyes on him, so he made no reaction. It would be dangerous for him and the servants if the nobles realised they were working together.

Solas was in his furtive corner, leaning against a statue, though Lavellan was almost tempted to describe it as lounging, luxuriating in the atmosphere. He rested in the slight shadows, regarding it all with a relaxed and almost amused disposition. Lavellan gravitated towards him before he could think about it.

He stopped in front of Solas.

Solas smiled, slow, easy, almost decadent.

“I do adore the heady blend of power, intrigue, danger, and sex that permeates these events,” he all but purred.

Holy shit, the bastard was tipsy.

Lavellan positioned himself slightly beside him and leaned back against the statue, pulled out the paper. It put him in a somewhat hidden position. Solas noticed the letter and angled himself as if further obscuring Lavellan from sight.

“Secret admirers?” Solas teased.

“I’ll let you know.”

“And why is that?”

“You seem to enjoy knowing everything about everyone.”

Package in upper guest wing. Require assistance.

“Well, well,” Lavellan murmured. “I’ve earned some friends.”

“I am unsurprised. I have heard whispers,” said Solas. “The elven servants seem willing to place a moderate amount of faith in you.”

“I suspect you’ve heard more than just whispers.”

Solas directed his smile at Lavellan, a subtle aristocratic confidence dripping from his demeanour. Why did Lavellan never question this further the first time?

Ah, yes.

Lavellan had been very, *very* attracted.

He almost laughed at himself. Or maybe cried. This was why you should always think with the head *above* the torso, not the one below it.

“Whispers, I fear, are the only currency I may deal with for now,” said Solas. “I do not quite have the look of an elven servant and so I cannot pass completely ignored. However, the Orlesians are unsure what to make of me. I have given them no purchase.”

Lavellan picked up on an interesting conversation and tuned into it. Solas noticed and quieted.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Lavellan. “I can do both just fine.”

“Are you boasting?”

He grinned. “Kind of.”

“You have truly proven yourself a marvel tonight.”

Lavellan's ears warmed at the praise, but he was thankfully distracted by the turn in the conversation he'd been eavesdropping on.

“Oh? How interesting,” said Lavellan. “Hear that, Solas? It would be a shame if word got out, wouldn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, I did not. You have dominated most of my attention.”

His thoughts and coherency fizzled pathetically out of existence but Lavellan hissed for them to return, fighting back his quickening heartbeat. He was only half successful.

“Have you been drinking?” Lavellan asked in lieu of a response.

Solas tipped his head. “Only a little,” he admitted. “The servants have been happy to refill my glass.”

Yeah? No shit. Some of them thought him a god.

Well, if he lounged about like that and spoke like that and overall was just like... *that*—

Lavellan cleared his throat and pushed off the statue, pocketed the note. “Well, time to see where this leads. I’ll be back.”

Solas’ eyes squinted from his smile.

“Hunt well,” he bid, sharp delight dancing within his eyes.

Lavellan's not here to play nice lmao.

Lavellan: hey guys look i have knives!

Orlesian nobles: hahaha ah yes i get it ur ears look like knives! oh Inquisitor ur too funny!!!

Lavellan, holding an actual knife behind his back: • ʘ •

Honestly, poor Lavellan's a mess of emotions tonight. The Winter Palace is both a battlefield and a museum of painful memories but he can't afford to let it get to him.

(Today, I cried over space. It's just so biG and beauTIFUL and we're all so goddamn small and I shouldn't have taken this astronomy subject I'm getting an existential crisis every five seconds)

-->[Lavellan moodboards that nobody asked for](#)<--

Prowling darkened corridors

Chapter Notes

Space is as BEAUTIFUL as you, dear reader, and it is as VAST AND BIG as my LOVE for you.

I love space.

But if I hear rotational and recessional velocity one more time i will make u measure the velocity of MY body hurtling thru space as i throw myself off this planet.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

the heart of this rotting realm—

Lavellan beheld the view on the empty balcony of the upper Guest Wing, frowned at the dots of light from the distant slums of Haramshiral. A reminder of his purpose tonight.

Vergala perched on the railings and cawed.

“Hello love,” he said with a smile and rubbed the underside of her beak. “You wouldn’t happen to know where a package that a few elves have dropped earlier is, would you?”

She took off and dove into the small garden beside the balcony, reappeared with a cylinder clutched tight in her claws, and dropped it into his waiting hand.

“Well hello,” he murmured and uncapped the cylinder, unrolled the paper inside. It was a log of the elves who’d disappeared in the Servant’s Quarters. He ran his fingers over Vergala’s head. “Well done. Stay alert and help the Inquisition soldiers if they need you. Anything suspicious, tell me.”

She cawed in agreement and departed. Lavellan pocketed the cylinder and returned to the party, conversed with a flustered Council of Herald’s Vassal (something about a guy named Philippe?), stumbled into Gaspard’s uncle, and collected a few more sordid scandals. After, he sidled up beside Bull, who was lurking beside the window.

And beside the table of food.

“I see you have the food, a view of the nobles, and a view of Dorian outside. Truly an opportune spot,” said Lavellan as he snagged a small pastry off a plate.

Bull eyed him. “You know?”

“Yes,” he said. “He hasn’t told me though.”

“This isn’t going to be a problem, is it? Not violating any rules if there even are any?”

“As if I’d presume to regulate who people take to bed. So long as it’s consensual and all parties are comfortable.” He glanced at Bull. “I suppose the question is if you two are alright with it.”

Bull shrugged. “We’ve got a good system going. It’s cool.”

Lavellan pressed his lips together. "Right." He was still uncertain about their relationship, had no desire to see Dorian heartbroken once again, but a lot of things had already changed. Bull had separated from the Qun, was absent of any allegiances or loyalty to it, but things could still go wrong. He huffed out a heavy breath and shoved the pastry into his mouth. For now, the best he could do was keep an eye on them.

"Solas is staring at you," said Bull.

Lavellan almost choked on his pastry, regretted eating the thing in one bite. Bull grinned.

A servant was quick to present him with a tray of drinks and Lavellan eyed the tray with suspicion, but the servant carrying it smiled at him and their face offered a spark of familiarity.

"Cap?" Lavellan asked dumbly as he took a glass of wine. Gone was the usual cap that was their namesake, their blonde curls pinned up into a knot. Their smile widened and they offered him a cloth to wipe his mouth with, glanced at it meaningfully, and left when Lavellan took it. There was something solid wrapped within the cloth, pressing into his palms.

Bull grunted beside him. "Oh come on, don't tell me you know the names of every servant here too?"

"You have more faith in my memory than I do." He took a sip of wine and his face scrunched mildly at the taste. He'd grown somewhat picky with his wine, and he placed the blame squarely at Dorian's feet for being so fussy. Stingy Orlesians wouldn't bring out their finest casks until the end of the night. Antivans had them beat.

He placed the glass down and made a show of wiping his mouth with the cloth, unfolded the cloth slightly as he pulled it away and spied the item within.

A small key. On the head were the carved initials *S.Q.*

Servant's Quarters! He tucked the cloth into his coat and met Cap's eyes across the room. Lavellan tipped his head slightly. They returned it and turned away. Well, this was new. His little detour in Halamshiral had earned him the elven servants' help it seemed.

"I expect trouble soon," said Lavellan. "Stay here."

"Taking Solas then?"

"Yeah."

Bull chuckled. "I'm going to be here the entire night, aren't I?"

"Now, now, don't be like that. You'll get your turn." Lavellan met Solas' stare across the room, subtly fiddled with his left cufflinks. *Fight soon*. Solas nodded.

Codes rarely worked half the time, more gimmick than practical, but devising a tasteful few had their uses.

"Be back," said Lavellan and entered the garden, spoke with the empress' three ladies-in-waiting, made more vague, metaphorical promises, then met up with Dorian. Lavellan eyed the trellises on either side of the fountain. He needed to reach the upper levels and enter Celene's secret office. Even if he already knew about Morrigan, there were important files there that Leliana could exploit later.

"I am a little uneasy about this excited gleam in your eyes," said Dorian beside him. "What mischief are you considering this time?"

"I need to get up there."

"Pray tell, *why*?"

"Library's up there."

Dorian sighed. "Inquisitor, if you wished to read books, this is not the place to do so."

"Please distract everyone?"

"There are at least twenty people here. How?"

"Orlesians love flashy displays."

Dorian stared at him. Lavellan beamed back.

His shoulders sagged in relent. "The things I do for you," he grumbled and Lavellan's beam brightened.

"Love you," he said.

"See, the ease in which you say that lets me know you truly don't."

"Are you questioning the force of my affections?" Lavellan asked, hand to his heart in mock offence.

"Towards Solas? No. Towards me? Very much so. Oh come now, don't give me that look," said Dorian with a teasing grin. "You know I'm right."

"Can we retire this conversation and get to the distracting thing?"

He waved a hand. "Such a demanding man I work for. Alright, go commit your crimes."

Lavellan inched away under the pretence of inspecting the rest of the garden while Dorian clapped his hands, made a grand sweeping announcement, and began the agreed flashy display. The Orlesians ooh'ed and aah'ed and Lavellan hauled himself up the trellis.

He must be quick. Solas was right in that his presence was overwhelming tonight and its absence would not go unnoticed.

Lavellan entered the library foyer and inspected the corner bookshelf, searched for the false book, and pulled it when he found it. A portion of the wall slid open.

He picked up Celene's letter to Morrigan in the study, folded and tucked important files away into his coat, and entered the library proper where Cole had sequestered himself.

"Everything alright?" Lavellan asked. Cole was the only one without an assigned station tonight, free to roam and wander so he wouldn't be distressed. Court was a difficult place for spirits of Compassion.

"This place hurts you," Cole said, fiddling with the edges of his gloves. "This place hurts itself too. Faces within faces, lying in layers and I can't help them. I tried to help. Then they didn't want me to. So now they've forgotten."

“This entire empire is built on hurt, Cole.” He sighed and sat on the arm of the chaise. “And it lives on it. They use it as a weapon.”

“Why?”

“Because hurt is powerful.”

He stared at Lavellan. “And you sharpen your hurt, shatter and show them they can’t do it that way. Flinching from hidden laughs, first taste of the world, and it was so cruel and you wouldn’t let that happen again.” Cole frowned and tilted his head. “Heavy disappointment on your tongue so you changed because you don’t want him to taste that same disappointment. You searched for a way to change your face.”

“Sometimes, I think you know more about me than I do,” said Lavellan.

“You know,” said Cole. “But there’s a curtain, cold, collapsing. It doesn’t want to let me in, doesn’t want anything in, but sometimes a bit of it falls and I see. You see too.” Cole closed his eyes as his brows furrowed, tilted his head as if attuning his ears to a certain sound. “It’s... old,” he said. “And gone.” He opened his eyes and shook his head.

The ballroom bell tolled and Lavellan glanced at the exit. It only tolled when somebody important was about to be introduced, and it would be suspicious and rude if the Inquisitor were absent.

“I have to go,” he said.

Cole was still frowning. “It hurts you here but... you like avoiding it. Dancing and dangerous, daggers flashing but words, not metal. You need it to be fun and dangerous. You don’t drown in the river when the currents are rushing and rapid. But Entropy always called too loud.” He shook his head and touched his hand to the Amulet of the Unbound beneath his uniform. “Don’t listen to it. We bind you. Stay with us.”

Lavellan stared at him, parsed through his words. The tarot card from the Fade flashed in his mind’s eye.

“That’s a demon name, isn’t it?” he murmured.

“You can’t be a demon,” said Cole and something foreboding lingered in his eyes. “But we’re more when we follow this world. Not a slide but a space. All at once.” His gaze dropped. “It’s worse.”

He laughed nervously. “Cole, I’d appreciate it if we kept the ominous warnings to a minimum tonight.”

Cole nodded. “It should be alright, tonight. The shadows are happy to be shadows again.”

“Right,” said Lavellan. “That’s better, I think? Will you be alright here?”

“Probably.”

“Alright, I’ll see you later.” Lavellan hurried through the library and re-entered the vestibule, puzzled over Cole’s words. So engrossed was he that he didn’t notice Morrigan approaching until—

“Well, well.”

Lavellan watched Briala's introduction finish and caught her look as she retreated to a secluded balcony. He passed on the secrets and scandals he'd acquired onto Leliana, whose eyes gleamed like a child receiving their first Satinalia present, then garnered Sera's attention from across the ballroom. He gave her the same signal he'd given to Solas. She perked up.

For now, he followed Briala into the balcony.

She turned and greeted him with a sharp smile, masked this time.

"Inquisitor Lavellan," she greeted. "We meet once again. What a coincidence."

"I know. It's almost as if we were invited to the same jamboree." He watched a butterfly drift over the flowers in a nearby vase. "I've had help from unexpected places tonight. Are you so eager to kill me that you point me towards the place where a lot of elves are seemingly not returning?"

Briala chuckled. "If I wished to kill you, Inquisitor, you wouldn't be here right now."

"Well now, I like to think I'm a little hard to kill."

Her gaze traced the silver cuffs on his ears and her smile turned entertained. "You've caused quite a stir tonight. The Inquisition is on everybody's lips. Especially its Inquisitor."

"All controversial things, I hope."

"You'll be pleased to hear it is."

"Very pleased." Lavellan returned her smile. "So then, Ambassador, mind telling me what I've done to earn the friendship of Halamshiral's elves?"

"Saving their people from slavery tends to do the trick. And seeing your aptitude for fighting... Well, I suppose out of anyone I send, you would have the higher rate of survivability. You *did* survive a fight of fifteen to one relatively unscathed."

"True enough. Your agents are likely dying because of Tevinter rats sneaking into the place, by the way."

"The same from yesterday, I presume?"

"The one and only."

"Well then, it's a good thing I'm sending you." Her eyes twinkled behind the mask. "It is so lovely to see these things work out."

"Are you going to investigate?" he asked.

"I'll follow later," she said. "I just need to receive a few more reports."

He nodded. "I'll see you around then, Ambassador."

"Try not to die. You've yet to uphold your grand promises."

“The Fade and an ancient darkspawn Magister tried to kill me and I’m still alive,” he said. “It’d be mortifying if I died from anything less.”

“It would be, and I would be the first to mock you at your funeral.”

“As you rightfully should.”

She snorted.

Lavellan took out the key Cap had given him and unlocked the door to the Servant’s Quarters. As soon as he shut it behind him, he sighed.

“This is turning out to be a long night,” he said.

“Agreed,” said Cassandra.

Sera sniggered. “Is your name really that long or are you having it on? You really Cassandra Allergy Porta Fillomajig Pentaghost?”

“It really is. My family is as pretentious as it is large.”

While they discussed Cassandra’s supremely long name and stitching it on breeches, Solas ran his hands along the stone of the wall and took out a loose brick. A small section of the wall swung open.

“The Winter Palace just conveniently has secret wall compartments?” asked Lavellan, tying his hair back.

“It has gone unused for quite some time,” said Solas and took out a sword, which he passed on to Cassandra. “But you would be hard-pressed to find a castle without secrets.”

“How did you gain access here?” asked Lavellan, trained his stare at the back of Solas’ head. He had agents here too after all, and some of them were likely within Briala’s ranks too.

Solas smiled at Lavellan over his shoulder. “I have my ways, just as you do.”

Lavellan couldn’t press further because the door opened and an Inquisition soldier peered into the room.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” they said and saluted, offered the rucksack with his weapons.

“Thank you.” He took it and the soldier returned to the party. Lavellan took his daggers, a few elixirs, and shoved the rest back into the cache in the wall. Solas passed Sera a bow and a full quiver, then reached into his coat and pulled out his shrunken staff.

Lavellan laughed. “How the hell did you hide that?”

Solas extended the staff with a flood of magic. “A true mage never divulges the secrets of their trade.”

“You’re obnoxious.” He detached his cape and tied it around his belt. “Is everyone’s weapon

alright?”

“It will have to do,” said Cassandra.

They navigated the corridors and empty rooms, and found themselves in the kitchens where the dead bodies of the elven servants greeted them.

“Whoever did this oughta be down here somewhere,” Sera said, but her eyes lingered on the bodies, fists clenched by her sides. “What fully qualified arsehole stops to kill a cook?”

Lavellan approached the dead servants. Rigor mortis hadn’t set in yet so this must be recent. He bowed his head and murmured rites.

They investigated the kitchens and quarters for any journals or logs but that proved fruitless, so they exited into the garden and passed the arcade of arbours. Another dead body awaited them by the fountain of the lower courtyard.

“This is no servant,” said Cassandra with a frown.

“Chalons crest on the dagger hilt,” said Lavellan. Florianne’s setup, but he had to play along. “Strange that they’d just leave this evidence out.”

“You suspect they’re setting up Grand Duke Gaspard?” Cassandra asked.

“Or he’s an idiot,” said Lavellan and crouched, retrieved the dagger and wrapped it in the dead Emissary’s sash. Could be useful later.

A scream interrupted them. His head snapped up and his gaze locked onto an elven servant running from a Harlequin.

“Solas—!” Lavellan called, and Solas’ magic was already stirring, ready, but with a swift slash, the Harlequin killed her. The rest of Lavellan’s words died in his throat.

Venatori soldiers followed close. The Harlequin dropped a pellet on the ground and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“I thought those stupid clown farps were Orlesian!” cried Sera, drawing her bow and letting her arrows fly. Lavellan sidestepped a charging Venatori and pivoted, stabbed into their neck.

“Venatori agent, likely,” said Lavellan. He spotted the Harlequin escaping into an upper window of the Grand Apartments beside them.

Solas’ barrier shimmered to life around him and deflected a Venatori’s slash. The barrier didn’t feel as it did yesterday. Holding back again today, it seemed.

After the last of them died, Lavellan hurried through the gardens and entered the Apartments to chase after the Harlequin, took care of the Venatori inside.

Lavellan slipped on a puddle of blood but Solas caught him.

“Try not to get blood on your uniform, Inquisitor,” said Solas.

“I’m not sure if your priorities are ordered quite right, Solas.”

“I suspect showing up at court in bloodstained clothes will net you a negative reputation, which may as well be a noose around your neck.” He dusted off the front of Lavellan’s coat, but Lavellan

was certain that there was nothing there. “But by all means.”

“Can you two shits oil and smash your bits another time?” asked Sera. “Don’t wanna hear this.”

Solas scowled and Lavellan burst into laughter.

More Venatori came at the sound and Sera threw the loaf of bread on the table at Lavellan’s head.

“You nob!” she shrieked. Which called even more Venatori to this, admittedly, rather large dining room, but even large dining rooms had a limit to how many angry Venatoris it could fit.

Anyway, it was *fine*. It turned out *fine*.

He gestured at himself and raised a challenging brow at Solas. “Am I bloodstained?”

Cassandra wiped her sword on the coat of a dead Venatori. “You will be if you continue being a child,” she threatened. Lavellan opened his mouth to protest but she shot him a withering look. “No.”

He closed his mouth, a smile threatening to pull at it.

“No,” she said again. “Do *not* laugh.”

Lavellan bit his lip and grinned, saluted, and they ascended to the upper floors to investigate further. More Venatori in a bedroom, trying to open the vault.

Sera shot the spellbinder and Solas engulfed the other three in flames before Lavellan could go in for the kill.

He shot Solas an unimpressed look. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Do you?” asked Solas.

“I feel as if you care more about the uniform than me.”

“Perish the thought.”

Lavellan snorted and examined the vault door. No locks or knobs. He sighed. Oh, he remembered this door. Pain in the ass. Small displays were inlaid into the wall around the door, showcasing decorative ornaments, but three were blank. He patted the lowest empty display and felt the three, small protrusions at the bottom.

“Kind of door doesn’t have a knob? Or a lock?” asked Sera, lightly kicking it.

“It has a lock,” said Lavellan and searched the room. Empress Celene’s old quarters. He searched the closet and pushed an assortment of clothes out of the way, opened nightstands and drawers.

“What are you doing?” asked Cassandra, tone edging into impatience. “The Venatori—”

“Aha!” crowed Lavellan and lifted a halla statuette, the base of it containing three small notches. He returned to the door and aligned the statuette base with the protrusions on the display, twisted. Something clicked. He grinned at them and gently kicked the door open. “Voila. Now then, why were the Venatori digging here?”

Sera all but dove into the room. Solas followed with more self-restraint and Cassandra lingered by the doorway to keep watch.

Lavellan crouched in front of the safe.

“Sera?” he called out. “Did you bring your lock—”

She chuckled the kit at him.

He caught it. “—picks.” He unrolled the kit, scrutinised the lock, and set to work. The lock was simple. Complacency from the vault’s annoying door.

Sera lurked behind him and looked at the lock over his shoulder, her cheeks hovering close to his. Lavellan stared at her. She gestured for him to continue and he returned to it, but she soon started drumming her fingers on her thigh, played with the short tail of his hair in the ponytail. Lavellan gave her an exasperated look, concentration ruined.

“Would *you* like to do it?” he asked.

“Oh piss, yes,” she groaned. “You’re slow!”

“That’s because you’re breathing down my damn neck.”

She bumped him with her hip. “Just let me. You stand over there and do what you do best, Quisitree.”

Lavellan grumbled and stepped back.

“Quisitree?” asked Solas.

“What, weren’t you there when I called him that?” asked Sera. “Tree ‘cause he’s all barky, but he’s got sap in his ins.”

Solas hummed. “Some trees hollow as they age.”

“Don’t ruin it!” complained Sera and the lock clicked open.

“So they’re dead inside?” asked Lavellan.

“Something along that vein.”

Lavellan stared at him. “I can’t be-leaf you just did that.”

“Wood you prefer it if I stopped?”

Oh Creators, how much had Solas drank for him to be indulging Lavellan like this?

“No, no, we have to get to the root of this issue,” said Lavellan. “Is this payback for the wolf puns?”

“You accused my humour of being high-brow and so I deigned to branch out and explore different avenues.”

He grinned. Someone was in a good mood. “Oh you deigned, did you? So generous of you to indulge me with this *dialog*.”

“What did I say about oiling each other’s bits?” asked Sera, punctuated it by throwing the safe door open.

“Apologies Sera,” said Solas. “I did not mean to cause you pine. However, I conifer yew re-leaf. Say the word and I will bough out.” He delivered it all with an austere expression. Lavellan was torn between groaning and cackling.

“Talk proper!” she cried.

“Alright,” said Lavellan, “I think it’s time to stop. She’ll get sycamore puns.”

Solas finally cracked a smile. “As you say. It would be tree-cherous of us to continue.”

Sera muttered to herself as she packed her lockpicks and marched out the door.

Lavellan covered his mouth so his laughter wouldn’t attract any Venatori still skulking about. Solas chuckled, and Lavellan’s chest and face warmed at the sound. He turned away before the warmth could squeeze into something hurtful and aching.

The opened safe contained a small and lonely jewellery box. Simple. For one owned by an empress at least. A forest had been painted on its exterior, blue in the morning mist, ornamented with silver filigrees. Lavellan opened it. The box held one, and only one thing.

An elven locket.

Lavellan took it, gave it a grim, considering look. The first time he’d found this, he’d been touched, somewhat. It was sweet that Celene had kept it. Now? He wasn’t sure. Perhaps Celene truly didn’t know why she’d still held onto it. She’d done her best to rid herself of it by leaving it here, but she’d never been able to truly let go.

Celene did love Briala. In whatever twisted capacity she could.

But Celene loved her throne more.

Solas stood beside him to investigate what had struck Lavellan silent. Lavellan stole a look at him.

“It is of elven make,” murmured Solas. Lavellan averted his gaze when Solas glanced at him.

“They loved each other for twenty years,” said Lavellan. “Built on lies as it was. That doesn’t disappear easily.” His gaze softened as he traced the delicate lines of the locket. “Love’s annoying like that.”

“You sound as if you speak from experience.”

Lavellan closed his hand over the locket and placed it in his pocket, said nothing in return. He wasn’t sure what to do about it. Maybe he could return it to Briala at the end of tonight.

He couldn’t answer Solas because Sera yelled from outside.

“I found the clown farp!”

Glad for the opening, Lavellan took it and fled that conversation. He dove right into the fight and clashed with the Harlequin, pretended that the ache in his chest was from the exertion.

The Harlequin kept evading his attacks. Lavellan gritted his teeth. He hated fighting against other rogues.

He untied his cape, threw it at the Harlequin, and splashed an elixir of fire at it. The reagents reacted and the Harlequin flailed at the flames, flung it off themselves and fled with a shriek.

Lavellan winced. They ran around the corner only to be met with a throwing knife to the throat.

The Harlequin fell with a gurgle. Briala swept into view, threw a nearby canvas over the Harlequin to douse the flames, then looked at Lavellan's group.

"Inquisitor Lavellan," she greeted. "You're still alive."

"Hello to you too, Ambassador," he returned. "I did say I was hard to kill."

She stepped over a dead Venatori with faint distaste. "So it seems. You've cleaned this place out well. It will take months to get all the Tevinter blood off the marble."

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it in time. Some of the servants were dead when I found them."

She sighed and they stepped out onto the balcony, away from the corpses. "You've avenged them, at the very least. Servants are always the first to die in the Game. You don't want them tattling after all." Briala watched the stars. "We mean nothing to them."

The elven locket weighed his pocket down.

"Not that I'm a saint," she said. "I'm guilty of the same thing."

"We all are," he murmured.

Briala gave him a considering look, and Lavellan let her gather whatever it was she needed. To a reasonable extent. Her eyes shimmered with a conclusion he wasn't privy to.

"The Council of Herald's Emissary?" she asked.

"Dead when we found him." He showed her the Chalons dagger. "Found this as the murder weapon. Either Gaspard is that much of an idiot or somebody's attempting to frame him."

"His strange sense of honour does turn him into an idiot sometimes. It can't be ruled out."

"The Chevalier code," he scoffed.

"Whether he did or did not, this is evidence against him." She smiled. "If that's the angle you're working at tonight."

"I could be working at an angle against you."

"A little late for that, Inquisitor."

Lavellan laughed. True enough. Not after his promises last night.

Briala's smile reminded him of the flat edge of a knife flipping to show its serrated edge. "You've gotten a taste of what it's like to have the support of an army of elven spies. I would bet coin that you'll be part of the peace talks tonight, and I can see you plan for it to be so. Continue leaning on our side and you'll get more than a taste."

He pursed his lips. "I'm not trying to amass an army."

"You often have little choice in the matter," said Solas behind him. "Earning loyalties will place you in that position."

"Don't I know it?" he muttered.

“Just a thought,” she said and unsheathed a small dagger, handed him its scabbard. “Keep the Chalons dagger. It may be useful later. See if this fits.”

It did. He wrapped the sash around the now sheathed dagger and tucked it back into his coat. Bless Madame Sartre for having sown so many inner pockets into this attire.

Briala crouched on the balcony's ledge. “You should return to the ballroom. The nobility will be bereft of your company.”

He scowled. “I’m sure they’re breathlessly anticipating a dance with me.”

“Off you go then. You don’t want to leave a string of broken hearts in your wake.” She leapt off the balcony and descended into the garden, gave orders to her agents, and they scattered to investigate further. Lavellan mussed his hair and turned to his companions with an exhausted grunt. This was shaping out to be a long night. Despite the other items in his pockets, he was most aware of the elven locket pressing into him.

“More politics and double-dealing,” said Cassandra. “Is there anyone here who isn’t corrupt?”

“It *is* Orlais,” said Lavellan. “Everyone has a hidden agenda tonight. It’s kind of par for the course. Even we have hidden agendas.”

“Do *we*?” asked Solas. “A fascinating use of the term.”

Cassandra frowned. “I suppose we are here to stop the assassination attempt.”

“That is the *we* of his sentence,” said Solas. “But what of the *you*, Inquisitor?”

And Lavellan smiled. “I don’t recall mentioning anything about me. I’m here to stop Orlais from descending into a latrine.”

“Neglecting to mention does not signify absence of the notion.”

Oh yeah? Bastard would know, wouldn’t he?

“What are you talking about?” asked Cassandra.

“Dunno but they make my head hurt,” said Sera. “Stop it.”

Lavellan said nothing and retrieved his fallen cape, the fire long doused. It wasn’t bloodstained, thank goodness, so he clipped it back on. They retraced their steps back to the room with the hidden cache and returned their weapons. Solas shrank his staff and tucked it back into his coat.

Sera had, surprisingly, remained the most pristine out of all them. She waltzed out, followed by Cassandra after she scuffed her boots on the stone floor to wipe off any blood on the soles.

The bell for the ballroom tolled and Lavellan grumbled, shoved his daggers back into the rucksack, patted himself down and fixed his attire as best he could, and untied his hair.

“Here,” said Solas. He turned Lavellan to face him and inspected his attire with a critical eye, fixed his cape, straightened the collar. His fingers brushed against the skin of Lavellan’s neck. Solas appraised him once more with a soft hum. “Better.”

“Once again,” said Lavellan, “I feel as if you care more about the uniform than me.”

“The uniform is your armour for tonight. I would prefer if it performed to a satisfactory standard.”

“You could’ve just said, ‘I don’t want you to die.’”

Solas met his eyes, grey in the dim. “I don’t want you to die,” he repeated.

Too late, Lavellan almost said but instead kept his mouth shut, gave Solas a smile that was more wry than sincere.

“Well,” said Lavellan, voice dry, “better go back to the ballroom. Jo’s right. Fashionably late’s a very fickle window.”

“One moment,” he murmured and carded his fingers through Lavellan’s hair, smoothed it back to something more presentable. Lavellan stayed still, refused to release the tension, otherwise he’d lean into Solas’ touch and the pleasant rake of his fingers and Lavellan had no time for that.

Solas arranged a few strands pedantically and Lavellan snorted.

“Don’t worry, Solas. I’m sure I can survive if one strand is a millimetre off.”

“I am sure,” he said and stepped back. “There. Go on. Charm and unnerve the Orlesian nobles in equal measure.”

“With absolute pleasure.” Lavellan threw a quick farewell over his shoulder and strode back towards the ballroom, the second bell tolling. Heads turned and whispers began anew at his arrival. A dance had begun on the floor.

“Inquisitor Lavellan?”

He turned towards the voice. Grand Duchess Florianne glided more than walked towards him, presenting him her deceptively mellow smile.

“Grand Duchess Florianne,” he greeted and bowed, itching for a dagger or a knife or a sharp object. Any sharp object. He was resourceful enough to make it hurt. Maybe stab her with the Chalons dagger.

“Welcome to my party,” she said.

“You have impeccable timing, I’m sure your approach is no accident.”

Her eyes glinted even as the rest of her expression, half-hidden by the mask as it was, remained genteel.

“Rarely anything in Orlais ever is,” she said. “I believe tonight you and I are both concerned by the actions of... a certain person.”

Lavellan already knew her next request but he beat her to it as he offered his hand and bowed once more, attracting attention as he did. A little petty victory for himself.

“Shall we dance, Your Grace?” he asked.

Florianne placed her hand in his and narrowed her eyes even as her smile remained. “I’d be delighted.”

Lavellan brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the knuckles, smiled against the skin and maintained eye contact, made sure the smile would shift his vallaslin. Florianne’s expression turned strained. He suspected he wasn’t the only one itching for a sharp object to stab with. How delightful!

“You honour me,” he said.

“The honour is all mine.”

He pulled her down to the dance floor and took up positions. The court watched their every move.

“Spies will have trouble hearing us this way,” he explained.

“Indeed,” she said, a touch irked at having her idea stolen.

And so, they danced. In more ways than one. Cunning words and sly remarks served as their swelling strings; euphemisms and metaphors their rhythm. They moved around one another like liquid storm, and Lavellan, not one to be outdone, manoeuvred Florianne through their dance and made themselves the eye of the tempest, enthralled those around them with their movements.

“It cannot have escaped your notice that certain parties are engaged in dangerous machinations tonight,” said Florianne. The stinging scent of her perfume curled around him as a boa constrictor would around its prey.

“Your Grace, ‘dangerous machinations’ is the national sport. Orlais would not be Orlais without it.” The dance floor had cleared for them at this point and every eye watched them, every nearby ear attuned to their conversation — what little they could pick up anyway.

Lavellan skilfully pulled her into position as the music and their dance neared its end. He dipped her and resisted the temptation to let her fall. The nobility gasped, applauded.

“You have little time,” warned Florianne as he pulled her up and they resumed the final steps. “The attack will come soon. You must stop Gaspard before he strikes. You will find the captain of my brother’s mercenaries in the Royal Wing garden. He knows all of Gaspard’s secrets.” And Lavellan suspected he would also find a quaint ambush. They bowed as the dance concluded. “I’m sure you can persuade him to be forthcoming.”

He straightened and smiled cryptically. “The night is young,” he said. “Who is to say what is left in store?”

The first hints of vicious delight finally sparked in Florianne’s eyes, so sure of her triumph and plan. *The illusion of victory.*

“I look forward to seeing how the night plays out,” she said and they parted ways.

Lavellan ascended the steps. Josephine was waiting for him with a pleased beam.

“You’ll be the talk of the court for months,” she gushed. “We should take you dancing more often.”

He laughed. “Sure, we’ll host a little party in Skyhold, invite Corypheus, and then I can waltz him into the Void.”

Her look turned reprimanding. “Only if you do not follow him.”

“Why not?” he asked. “I heard the Void’s a really popular tourist destination lately. Nice, cold, very Void-y.”

Josephine scrutinised him, her reprimanding look fading in favour of a smile.

“You’re enjoying the Game!” she said.

“Jo, I don’t think that’s a good thing to be happy about.”

“Why not?”

“People... kind of die?”

She blinked, then sighed, pressing a worried knuckle to her lips. “That is the one part of it that I have always detested. Otherwise, it is a mentally stimulating endeavour.”

“Were you dancing with Duchess Florianne?” Leliana asked as she and Cullen caught up with them, her tone edged with excitement.

“I think it was more smiling threateningly at each other than dancing,” said Lavellan.

“I heard there was fighting in the Servant’s Quarters,” said Cullen. “What happened?”

Lavellan frowned. “Tevinter agents snuck in. Been killing servants. Florianne is trying to convince me that Gaspard is the traitor but I wasn’t born yesterday. She’s up to something.”

“You gathered that while dancing?” asked Cullen. “How? No, wait, never mind. Forget I asked. Maker, I don’t know how you three can enjoy it here.”

“Poor Commander,” cooed Leliana. “Spending the entire night draped in adoring crowds.”

“A true travesty,” agreed Lavellan. “I would wish for adoring crowds draped over me too, but I suspect I’ve terrified half the court and disgusted the other half.”

Josephine raised a brow. “You would hate the attention.”

“Ah, but consider this: adoring crowds.”

“Inquisitor, you look as if you will vomit if anyone so much as even thinks of kneeling in front of you. How would you fare with an adoring crowd?”

Lavellan opened his mouth for a rebuke, paused. He closed it.

“If this comforts you,” said Leliana with an amused smile, “the enigma you’ve constructed around yourself draws their curiosity.”

Cullen crossed his arms with a disgruntled scowl. “Yet they stay a lovely distance away. May we swap?”

“Sorry Commander. You can’t quite pull off a threatening smile,” said Lavellan. “You end up looking like an angry puppy when you try.”

He sputtered and Leliana patted his hair with soft, reassuring coos. Cullen batted her hand away.

“There’s still the matter of the attack against the empress,” Cullen said to retain his dignity. “Are you still planning on leaving things be?”

Lavellan’s smile faded and he rubbed the back of his neck, staring out at the balcony where Celene was speaking with a few nobles. Once again, the elven locket in his pocket pressed at him and he contemplated showing it to either or both Celene and Briala. But he refrained.

“I am,” he said. “I’ve found a few things that the Ambassador can use as a solid leash.”

Leliana eyed him. "And you are still sure about this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"It is a little different from your usual, is all."

Lavellan frowned. "I—" He shook his head and turned away. "I'm going to mix up everybody's stations a little bit. Commander, I need you on standby. Have the soldiers ready at any moment's notice." He was about to face Florianne's surprise Venatori and demons so he would need Bull and Blackwall. Maybe Cassandra? No, he shouldn't push her too much. Her shoulder was on the cusp of recovering but he mustn't force it. Solas was a given because he was the only mage with a staff tonight.

That would leave the Guest Wing unwatched. He could station Dorian and Varric there. Wherever Varric was. And later, they had to return to the ballroom.

"I'm going to need physical evidence of Gaspard's orders to his mercenaries," said Lavellan. "I think I know where to look. While I run around, get me access to the Royal Wing. Work with the elven servants. Tell them Inquisitor Lavellan requires their help."

Josephine's brows raised. "You're working with Ambassador Briala?"

"I guess so. I didn't set out to, but apparently my actions yesterday have swung me into their good graces."

"That would certainly move things along," said Leliana.

"Alright, let's go," said Lavellan.

Cullen nodded. "At once, Inquisitor. Be careful."

They went their separate ways. Lavellan hunted in the ballroom in the meantime because he still had unfinished business.

The Orlesians had a saying: 'To play the Game, you must dance with the Dowager'. If Marquise Mantillon deemed him worthy of conversation, it was a good indicator of his standing with the court. He must be in their good graces too, otherwise Briala would be in trouble later. This early influence was essential.

There she was.

Lavellan approached with the right blend of deference and confidence, and bowed. "Good evening, Lady Dowager," he greeted.

He could feel eyes drawing towards them, their breaths held, awaiting the Dowager's response, if she would deign to give it to him.

"Lord Inquisitor Lavellan," she returned. He kept his composure, but he celebrated the small victory. "A Dalish in the Winter Palace, more genteel than the Grand Duke. That's put this lot in their place, hasn't it? You have certainly captured the court's attention tonight. Fascinating for some. Dangerous for others."

"Which am I to you, Lady Dowager?" he asked.

"I have yet to decide."

Lavellan smoothly offered his hand. “Perhaps a dance can assist with the decision-making process?”

Dowager Mantillon’s eyes narrowed in slight glee. She snapped her fan open and fanned herself delicately. “I believe you have other dances to attend to. Perhaps save me a dance for another time?”

Lavellan gave her a gracious nod and bowed once more. Victory after victory for him tonight. This truly was a magnificent evening if the court’s approving whispers and looks were anything to go by. He'd been acknowledged.

“Then if you will excuse me,” he said and pardoned himself. Dowager Mantillon watched him go over the arc of her fan.

The victory came with a price too. The court’s approval meant their attention, and that would make it even harder to slip away for a long time. Crossing the length of the ballroom took longer than he'd anticipated since several people accosted him on the way.

The gift that Command had bestowed upon him in Crestwood came in handy now, and gazes slid over him as he passed after he'd tired of tripping over another sycophant.

Shadows and feathers darted in his periphery.

Lavellan turned.

Nothing there.

He narrowed his eyes, scanned his surroundings, before he resumed and left the ballroom.

[Da'el'ean](#), cooed the Well of Sorrows. *[Banal'rasen unina na. Syn ma?](#)*^[1]

“*[Ahnsul?](#)*” Lavellan smiled as he stalked through the palace. “*[Tel'unvaran.](#)*”^[2]

Chapter End Notes

So many game mechanics in this quest make NO SENSE when applied to writing Imao (wtf was the ballroom bell signalling? And how come you're able to just climb a trellis in full goddamn view how have you not lost 50 points from accessing your inner monkey? Also halla statues as keys are so inefficient) The only halla door that'll appear will be the vault door. That's it.

Solas out trying real hard to find any reason to touch Lavellan in some way.

Translations

[1]

Da'el'ean: Little raven (lit. secret bird - note: el'ean and raag both mean raven but el'ean refers to ravens specifically related to Dirthamen. Different connotations)

Banal'rasen unina na. Syn ma?: The shadows missed you. Do you?^[1]

[2]

Ahnsul?: What for?

Tel'unvaran: (I) never left [\[1\]](#)

Sweep aside the pieces

Chapter Notes

My godsent friend has kindly agreed to proofread my work because 99% of the time I'm too tired to proofread properly

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

smoke and masks where peace is—

“Did you see that knife-eared serving girl in the kitchens?”

“Keep talking. I’m starting to believe I was there.”

Lavellan’s lips curled in disdain, smoothing into a smile once he slipped within view of the guards situated outside Gaspard’s Trophy Room. A myriad of ways that he could subtly humiliate or sabotage them flitted past his thoughts but he regretfully placed them aside. He had to work fast. The night was nearing its conclusion. He had to settle for redirecting them to Commander Cullen with the promise of grand stories of the Inquisition’s feats and silently apologised to Cullen for dumping so many people onto him. Lavellan would make it up to him. Somehow.

He didn’t linger long. Once he’d swiped the orders on Gaspard’s table, he was out with no one the wiser. Lavellan passed through the Guest Wing. Solas was still in his corner, and he raised his wine glass in salute when their gazes met. Lavellan smiled back. Solas had better take care not to overindulge with the alcohol.

Dorian was still in the gardens when Lavellan walked out.

“Please,” begged Dorian at his approach, “no more climbing trellises.”

Lavellan chuckled. “No, don’t worry. I’m relocating you in a bit. I need you to keep an eye on the Guest Wing with Varric because I’m taking Bull and Solas with me.”

“You know, I’m almost jealous of Solas. You drag him with you everywhere.”

“Untrue.”

“You drag him with you everywhere when you aren’t fighting,” he corrected.

He scowled.

Dorian shrugged and grinned. “Just as well that you do. I *cannot* stand it when he gives you his sad, smitten glances. It makes me terribly tempted to hit the back of his head.”

“Solas does not give me sad, smitten glances.”

“I assure you, he does. He looks at you as if you’re the sun.”

“You squint at the sun,” Lavellan muttered.

“I said what I said. He squints when you’re terribly bright and giving him grief, and yet he basks in your presence when you are a little gentler. Like a man relishing the warmth of the sun in winter.”

He crossed his arms and looked away, heart twisting. “Dramatic. You should start writing. Maybe you can upstage Varric.”

“Nothing can upstage that dwarf when it comes to words.”

Lavellan grunted. “Speaking of, where is he?”

Dorian cackled at the topic change and Lavellan’s disgruntlement grew.

“You know,” said Dorian, “he made me take over his post because he heard you were dancing and wished to watch.”

“Varric?”

“No, Solas!” Dorian gestured at himself. “I, being the good friend that I am, graciously accepted. His first reaction when he returned was to grab a glass of wine and finish half of it in one swig.”

Was that— Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

“Varric?” Lavellan asked again, impatience pulling at his tone.

Dorian grinned but at least he obliged and nodded at a surreptitious door by the borders of the garden. “Disappeared through there. Avoiding the Merchant’s Guild, he says.”

“Smart dwarf. Alright, once I take Bull and Solas, move in. When the bell tolls, get in the ballroom as soon as you can. Forget fashionably late.”

“As I said, it is impossible to be fashionably late when my arrival starts the party.”

“You are the wisest of men, Monsieur Pavus.”

Dorian stroked his chin with a sagely hum. “I am, aren’t I?”

Lavellan snorted and left, descended into the lower gardens. They considered this area the seedy area. As seedy as Orlesian nobles could get, anyway. It was also the perfect place for gathering secrets, which was likely a part of the reason why he found Varric there, besides avoiding the Merchant’s Guild.

A group of nobles had crowded around Varric, badgering him about his novels. His eyes lit in relief at Lavellan’s approach.

“Excuse me, the Inquisitor and I have important matters to discuss!” said Varric. He dragged Lavellan away to a small fountain so that the trickling water would drown out their conversation.

“Important matters to discuss,” said Lavellan, smiling. “Such as you missing my dance with the Grand Duchess.”

“Now, now, is that admonishment I hear?”

“Disappointment. How will you chronicle my great adventures and ferocious battles in the sordid Orlesian court if you’re too busy being popular and dodging the Guild?”

“I guess I’ll just have to rely on second-hand account.”

“Don’t bother. Here’s first-hand: I annoyed her.”

Varric laughed. “You know what? That’s in-character. Let me guess, you foiled her devious plans of sabotage and subterfuge with your sly remarks and clever words?”

“Close. I outdanced her.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t.” He grinned. “Will you be alright to go up for a few moments? I’m taking Bull and Solas with me and nobody’s keeping an eye on the Guest Wing. Dorian will be there. I can ask Cole if you can’t make it.”

Varric hummed, stared up at the door. “Should be fine now, I think.”

“Alright. You know the drill with the bell.”

“Run like my testicles are about to be set on fire by a slighted Chantry sister.”

“Sure. Why not?”

Varric left and Lavellan geared to follow, but he lingered, eyes drawn to the doorway teasing a view of hazy colours and shadows. It was a smoking room and gambling den, if he recalled correctly. He debated the advisability of entering, but his feet made his choice for him as they led him inside. A dull throb pulsed at the base of his skull. He frowned. Another memory?

He entered the room choked by smoke, enticing aromas mixing. Tables had been set up for card games and plush pillows were arrayed on the floor around hookahs that the nobles took turns huffing on.

One of them gestured Lavellan over.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” the noble greeted as he neared. “I admit, I am surprised to see you here.”

There were four of them. Three men and a woman, though she was on a chair as her dress was too voluminous.

“Are you here for smoke or chance?” the nobleman asked. Lavellan assessed his mask. House Pierremont’s.

“My entire life is chance, my lord,” said Lavellan with a smile. “But for now, I’m here for a smoke.”

Pierremont gestured at the space beside him and presented Lavellan with the tube and a fresh cloth to wipe it with. He took them as he sat.

“Elderberry,” said Pierremont. “Dash of cinnamon. Tang of citrus. Have you done it before?”

What kind of atrocious mixture is that? “It’s been a while,” he said instead and took in a short drag, acclimatised himself first. Whatever bullshit flavours Pierremont had described were lost on him because Orlesians never prepared it right.

He paused.

Because Orlesians never prepared it right? How would he— The only time he’d smoked had been in Orlais and Tevinter, but the preparations were the same. How else would—

Flickers of colour, spokes of light through the hazy fog. I tip my head back and smile as the secrets spill around me.

The smoke burned his lungs and they tightened, unused to it. He coughed. Pierremont and his friends laughed but not out of scorn. He clapped Lavellan on the back.

“Nothing more invigorating than a spasming lung!”

Have you tried being chased by a dragon?

The taste lingered on his tongue, dissatisfying. Dull. It should be round, flavourful, and the burn should coax, not shock.

How did he know this?

He passed the pipe to Pierremont without a word and focused instead on eavesdropping. Lavellan mustn't linger here too long.

By the time the pipe had returned to him, he had two new pieces of information. He drew in what he resolved would be his final drag, the smoke curling in his lungs as he tipped his head back during his exhale. The colourful silks draped along the ceiling glimmered with lights from the stained-glass lanterns. Dots of colour through the smoke.

Prepared wrong or not, the smoke at least elicited the same pleasant gauze of relaxation in his head. It coexisted with the dull headache.

Lavellan sank further into the pillows, eyes on the colours muffled by the grey haze. Pulse, pulse, throbbing in his head, spreading, coating, breathing in smoke—

He approaches, menacing yet so out of place in this establishment, and he seats himself beside me, lips twisted in his displeasure. Flames travel along the elaborate crystal threads striating the vaulted ceilings and the flickering of their lights highlight the sharp angles of his face in bursts. Smoke of changing hues wrap around us. Everywhere, colour. Sweetness in the air. Beyond the curtain of smoke, faint outlines of bodies tangle in compromising positions of violence, sex, neither, both, or otherwise. It doesn't matter. Nothing here matters.

Everything here matters.

“You shouldn't have worn your armour,” I say, and take a nonchalant drag, admire the gradient of colours that escape my lips with every word. “It will smell. But I suppose I can give you the spell to take it away if you don't already know it.”

“I had not taken you for a smoker,” he says, eyeing the hookah and jewels inlaid upon its golden surface.

“Not usually. I'm here when things have gone to utter shit.” I offer him the pipe but he refuses. I shrug and take another drag, blow the smoke in his face to annoy him. He stares back, unimpressed. I smile. “Why are you here?”

He picks up the pearls on the tray and crushes them in his hand in a blatant display of boasting, drops them into the goblet of wine. It fizzes.

I scowl. "That's mine."

He keeps his gaze on me over the rim as he drinks. Ass.

"I was looking for you," he says after his sip. "Dirthamen is asking."

I study him, his face bare of the mark of devotion. It no longer twists my stomach, seeing him bare-faced, and I no longer know what that says about me. But that's alright. Tonight isn't a night for knowing. I am tired of thinking.

"I didn't know you did Dirthamen's bidding, [ma Venuralas](#),^[1]" I say.

"Do not," he snarls, "address me as such. I am no god."

Always so short-tempered, this one. "Still on about that?"

"I am not, and will never be, an Evanuris."

"Maybe not," I concede. Unintentionally, my eyes track the rest of his bare face. "But it's too late for everyone else."

"Then I would prefer, in your company, that I am only a man."

"How about an annoyance?" I ask, but the words are leaden with meaning, conveying a placating apology in tandem with the aura of remorse I give him. The aura accidentally carries some of my exhaustion. I must be very tired indeed if I slip like this.

A smile pulls at his lips. "That will do," he says. Apology accepted, it seems.

I reach for his face, gripped by a mesmerised compulsion, a strange curiosity. My fingers ghost over the areas where Mythals' tree once branched over his forehead. He freezes beneath my touch but he doesn't rebuff me, stays still as I continue over the bridge of his nose, following the slope of his cheeks. My knuckles sweep beneath the curve of his eye.

"What is it you search for?" he asks. I'm unsure if his voice sounds soft because of the pleasant haze in my system or if it truly is.

"Your patience."

"You have a talent for exhausting mine."

"Not much to exhaust."

I mean to draw my hand back but it lingers. The heat of his breaths fan over the skin of my wrist.

"Ras," he murmurs, "what are you doing?"

"Observing," I whisper, tracing the hard line of his jaw, lightly gripping his chin and tilting his head so he can meet my gaze. The golden rings in his hair clink at the sudden movement. "Why are you really here?"

He stares. No aura from him so I can't discern his thoughts or emotions. He's hidden it.

"You know that makes me more suspicious," I say.

"It serves its function. Cast what suspicions you may have. That does not make it any less hidden."

I scrutinise him but say nothing. Once more, I offer the pipe.

"Try it," I say.

"No, thank you. I do not care for the burning in my lungs, no matter how enticing the flavour and aroma."

"So you'd prefer the flavour without the burn. Is that a metaphor?"

He smiles. "No, but if you wish, you may continue believing me to be an accidental literary master."

"Well you have to be good at something, I suppose," I tease, and he sighs. I roll the pipe between my fingers in contemplation. "Well then, if it's flavour without the burn, I think I can oblige."

He gives me a curious look and I hum, pleased. Curiosity fits his face far better than cold and careful neutrality. I take a deep drag from the pipe and hold the smoke in my mouth, flavours bursting on my tongue, and press my thumb to his bottom lip to gently pry open his mouth. He doesn't fight it. Merely watches in curious anticipation.

I lean closer, tilt my head and hover my lips over his. Close, but not touching. I open my mouth, let the smoke pour from mine into his. It curls between us, red to gold to emerald.

Once the smoke dissipates, I move back.

He stays quiet, lips still parted as he watches the rest of the smoke drift away. I observe his reaction. He closes his eyes.

"You've been leading them to me," he finally says.

"Whom?" I ask, though I already know.

A slow smile spreads across his lips. He's been smiling a lot, as if it fights to remain or return when he assumes another expression. "The reports are the same. Some say an elf who is red of hair led them to the sanctuary. Others say he is battle-worn and dark-skinned, or curly-haired and freckled, or kindly and long-faced." His eyes open and he takes the pipe from my fingers, though his gaze remains on me. "Yet two things remain constant: one, they always bore Dirthamen's vallaslin. Two—" he tilts his head— "they were all golden-eyed."

I smile back but say nothing, though that is answer enough on its own. He takes a drag and I raise a brow.

His fingers curl around my neck and he pulls me in.

I taste sweet smoke and Rebellion.

Lavellan opened his eyes, hadn't realised they'd closed, the chatter around him softened by the relaxation. The pipe was back in Pierremont's hand so it must have circulated another time. He stood in what he hoped was a composed manner and excused himself with a pleasant smile. He took in greedy breaths of fresh air outside.

What was that?

Lavellan couldn't let anybody see him falter so he returned to the upper garden, hid himself in a clandestine corner, and braced himself against the wall. He covered his face with his shaking hand. What was that? What—

What had happened?

Had Solas forgotten him?

Lavellan rubbed a hand down his face and parsed through the noise of his emotional turmoil, uprooting the facts and the information. There were still several unknowns and he didn't have the full story.

His heart ached. Lavellan wasn't certain why anymore. He pressed his trembling hand to his chest. All he knew was that he'd helped ferry the slaves to Fen'Harel's sanctuary.

In both of his past lives, he'd ferried the slaves to the Dread Wolf.

In both of his past lives, he'd led them to false hope and doom.

The emotions and inherent knowledge he'd gained from the memory overlapped with his current, screaming thoughts. He closed his hand over his ears, the cold metal of his ear cuffs biting into his sweating palms. Smelled the smoke on him. Tasted the arid, flat, spiking flavours from the smoke turning stale at the back of his tongue.

A whisper of wind, the curl of shadows, and Cole was there in front of him.

Lavellan glanced up. Cole's eyes widened as their gazes met and he wordlessly pulled Lavellan close and wrapped his arms around him. The concept of a hug eluded Cole, but apparently that was what Lavellan needed right now so he attempted. It was a good attempt. Cole's hug was warm and safe.

"Solas says the Dalish need touch," said Cole. "You never ask. I never knew. You never think of it."

"I'm a little busy," Lavellan mumbled into his coat.

"But you need it. Yearning, buried beneath the broken thoughts. Oh," he said. "That's why I didn't hear it. The hurt was too loud. And now it's louder again. It's okay."

Lavellan scrunched his eyes shut. There was too much information in his head and his exhausted mind could only sort through so many so fast.

"He doesn't remember," Lavellan said, loathed how feeble he sounded. This was supposed to be his night. The shadows and light were his to command tonight, he was at his best tonight, victory

after victory through wit and charm and yet— He was better than this. Should be better than this. Why was it always Solas who always unbalanced him? One person shouldn't have this much weight in another's life.

“But it's not just one though,” said Cole. “We all have weight. The Iron Bull chose to stay and you saw that things could change. You helped me move forward instead of left or right and you saw there were other paths. Cassandra stayed no matter what and you saw that true loyalty can exist without strings.” Lavellan clutched at Cole's coat. “And Solas always cares. Too much, sometimes. Traps and tempts and turns him away from his duty but it cannot be, cannot be. Fool. Such an unwise fool.”

Lavellan laughed mirthlessly. “I'm not sure if that makes me feel any better.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, I— Thank you for trying.”

“You need to feel it,” said Cole. “Untangle and unknot the unknown until you see what it should be. It sounds very hard.” He hugged Lavellan tighter. “I'll help.”

Lavellan's trembling eased and he spied blue lights dancing in his periphery. Once his trembling ceased, Cole stepped back, eyes still wide with tentative curiosity.

“Can you think now?” he asked. “I can't take the hurt, but I can take the screaming. Still the surface of the sea so you can see the shells in the sand.”

His thoughts had indeed calmed, better suited for objective reasoning. Lavellan smiled.

“That was a lot of sibilliance, Cole. Do spirits like alliteration that much?”

Cole blinked, brightened somewhat. “It's like singing. We sing when we do it. You like it when we do it.”

“I do.” He took a deep, steadying breath, and reached for the stone in his pocket, relaxing further. “Are we being watched?”

“Yes, but I'll make them forget.”

“Thank you.” Last thing he needed were the Orlesians clambering over his moment of weakness like weevils on hard tack.

“He didn't mean to forget,” said Cole. He fiddled with the hem of his sleeve, eyes glazing, gaze darkening. “But it made him.”

Lavellan stared. “What?”

Cole blinked, dazed.

“Sorry,” he said. “You're both too deep. I go too far sometimes and the air starts running out.”

“That doesn't sound good. Try not to push yourself.” Still, what did it mean? Had an outside influence meddled? If so, why? What for? Was it tied to Solas' rebellion? He shook his head. No, he had to leave those for later. Tonight, he had other concerns.

“Can I fight with you?” asked Cole.

“Thank you, but I need you in the ballroom in case Florianne tries something and I can’t stop her in time.”

Cole hesitated and Lavellan recognised the scrunch of his brows and the wringing of his fingers as worry. He smiled, affection warm in his chest as it displaced the turmoil.

“It’s alright, Cole,” he reassured. “I’ll be alright. I can handle it, thanks to you.”

“If you start hurting again and I can’t answer, ask Solas for help. He won’t ask if you tell him not to.”

“If he’s the one who caused the hurt?”

“Make him say sorry,” he said, though it sounded a little like a warning and Lavellan chuckled.

“His apologies never make me feel better,” said Lavellan. “But it *is* vindicating to see him asking for forgiveness sometimes.”

Cole eyed him. “No, it’s not. You think that’s how it should feel but it’s not.”

“Let me lie to myself for a little longer.”

Movement caught his attention and when he turned, an elven servant was there, offering a tray of finger treats. She’d discerned them so easily in the shadows. He supposed one had to be familiar with the shadows when serving in Orlais.

Lavellan smiled. “What have you got there?” he asked.

“Treats, Inquisitor Lavellan,” said the servant demurely. “They have been prepared thoroughly as per your request. We have done our best to cater.” The Royal Wing was open.

“I appreciate it,” he said and took a treat for show. It was a rounded biscuit with filling in the middle. “Thank you for your hard work.”

The servant bowed and left. Lavellan bit into the biscuit, expected it to crumble or crunch, but it gave beneath his teeth. Soft. Somewhat airy. A lovely burst of sweetness on his tongue which removed the disgusting remnants of the smoke’s aftertaste.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” said Cole. “Your lungs don’t like it. Why do you put it there?”

Lavellan ate the last of the treat and made a note to ask about its name later.

“Recreation,” he answered.

“But... it hurts?”

“Yeah, we’re stupid like that. We chase sensations.”

“Oh,” said Cole in understanding. “But you still shouldn’t do it.”

Lavellan laughed. “They don’t make it right anymore so yes, I’ll refrain.”

He frowned. “Even if they make it right.”

“Alright,” Lavellan agreed fondly. “Alright.”

He wrapped his hands around his ironbark bow, felt a little more put together. Solas closed the compartment behind the wall and returned the obnoxious painting back over it. Behind them, Bull gave the greatsword a few swings and Blackwall took the shield hanging on the wall.

“You were smoking,” said Solas. Lavellan tied his hair back.

“Sordid secrets in seedy joints, you know how it is. Sorry, do I smell?”

“Faintly. Please refrain from doing it often.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Cole’s already expressed his worry and I do so hate disappointing him. He gives you that look.”

Solas chuckled. “Indeed.”

“Not fond of smoking?”

“No,” he said. “The burn is unpleasant and any enticing flavours are lost on me.”

A scream cut their conversation short as it sliced through the stagnant atmosphere. Lavellan sprinted towards the sound, kicked open the door into one of the bedrooms and startled the Harlequin standing over an elven servant.

Lavellan gave them no time to react. He planted his foot into the Harlequin’s gut and kicked them out the window.

“Goodnight,” he said and closed the windows with finality.

Bull threw his head back and laughed while Solas sighed. Lavellan helped the elven servant up.

“Sorry to push your dance partner out the window,” he said.

She chuckled nervously as he pulled her up. “I don’t mind,” she replied. She was one of Briala’s agents, she said, and she claimed that Briala had sent her here to die since she was one of the few to know the truth of Briala’s past as Celene’s handmaiden and spymaster. Lavellan frowned. A little something to discuss with Briala later. He sent the servant to Cullen for protection.

Man, Cullen was going to wring his neck later.

“Don’t tell me all of this fighting is from a lover’s quarrel,” grunted Bull.

“No,” said Lavellan. “The issues weren’t born from the slight between them. Other way around.” It must be tiring for Briala, having your actions connect back to your romantic connection. Others had claimed the same during his efforts against Solas. That it was all just a convoluted and extreme lover’s quarrel. Cassandra had had to physically hold him back and drag him away before Lavellan could make a scene, and by the gods had he been ready to make a scene.

“But she used to work for the Empress,” said Bull. “It’ll still look suspicious to the others and she knows it. That’s why she sent that girl to die.”

“Yeah, I’ll have a talk with her about it later. But going back to her past as a servant, did we all not

follow orders once out of loyalty and later found out we were working for assholes? Or that there was an inherent flaw in the system we've served, or that the actions you did under service was despicable, or all of the above?"

Every single person in this room grimaced or turned their head away in shame. Even Lavellan.

"There we go," murmured Lavellan. "I can't fault her for realising she's dedicated herself to a rotting empire under the mistaken belief that doing so helped her people, and now wants to rebel."

An ancient part of him settled after having been given voice. Lavellan stood still, strangely liberated after the admission. An admission. It *was* an admission, wasn't it?

Yet there still lingered that unshakeable love and devotion for the god with the violet eyes.

There was another shift of shadows in the corner of his vision, but Lavellan already learned that it wasn't worth looking and searching for its source. He would always find nothing.

"She must take care," said Solas, unable to meet Lavellan's gaze. "Ensure her well-meaning actions do not cause further damage to her people." His sorrow shimmered beyond reach yet it was warm and alive beneath Lavellan's hands.

"That's true," Lavellan murmured. Did Solas see the similarities between him and Briala? Lavellan meant to say more, maybe words of comfort or hope, but he was at a loss too, so he continued instead.

There was another cry for help behind one of the doors. Lavellan picked the lock, this time without Sera bumping him out of the way, and opened it to Empress Celene's private quarters.

"Does the literal empress of Orlais need better locks or are you just very good?" asked Blackwall.

Lavellan smiled and shrugged.

They ascended the short steps to the ornate bed. The captain of Gaspard's guard stared at them, naked and tied-up.

Bull guffawed. "Classic," he wheezed.

"This isn't what it looks like!" the captain pled. "Honestly, I would prefer it if it were what it looked like. The Empress led me to believe I would be... rewarded for betraying the Grand Duke." And so he relayed his grand tale of woe and betrayal and Lavellan's smile grew. Blackwall chortled in his corner. Solas looked on with a small, entertained smile.

"Don't tell Gaspard!" begged the captain.

Well no shit this man got nowhere. Empress Celene had no preference for swords.

"You know, Mercy," said Bull, "this is good blackmail for the Empress."

Lavellan pursed his lips. Solas glanced at him. What use was blackmail against a dead person?

"I think I'll leave him here," said Lavellan.

"*What?*" asked the captain. "You can't do that!"

And just to prove that yes, he could, Lavellan walked away.

“You piece of shit!” cried the captain.

Gather all your pieces, whether you’ll use them or not.

Lavellan paused, turned the thought over. It came from a ruthless part, an ancient part, awakened by tonight’s intrigues. Perhaps this was why he enjoyed court. This was his domain, where flux was encouraged, where flux was the natural state, the natural order.

“Inquisitor?” asked Solas.

He spun on his heel and returned to the glaring captain. An impressive look for somebody trussed up like poultry.

“Here’s the deal,” said Lavellan. “I free you, but you keep your mouth shut unless I ask you to testify against Celene.” His eyes widened. Either at the audacity of Lavellan’s request or his referring to the empress by name. “Get even the smallest thought of disobeying me and I assure you, your name and future will be ruined come morning.”

“I’ll do anything, I swear.”

Lavellan smiled sweetly. “I know.” He stepped back. “Bull, can you undo the binds please?”

Bull grinned. “No experience with ropes?”

“Not these kinds,” he laughed.

Once the captain was free, Lavellan directed him towards — surprise, surprise — Commander Cullen. Forget Corypheus. Cullen would murder Lavellan himself for dumping so many people onto him and worsening his headache.

They continued through the rest of the Royal Wing and entered areas under renovation, faint silhouettes of scaffoldings and sheets looming in the dim room. Lavellan lit the way with the Anchor, more for his non-elven companions’ sakes since their eyesight wasn’t as good in the dark.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” said Blackwall.

Lavellan stopped. Oh, shit.

“Didn’t you?” he asked, voice commendably even. Solas narrowed his eyes. “Well, I can. I’m really not sure why you’re surprised about me using it as a portable torch when I can stab holes in the Veil with it.”

Solas scowled. Probably didn’t appreciate the mark imparted by his oh so powerful foci being referred to as a portable torch.

“That’s... a fair point,” said Blackwall.

“That’s pretty *handy*,” Bull said and Lavellan sniggered.

“Nice.”

Lavellan led them, hand held high, but it flared once they stopped in front of a set of doors. A rift.

“You painted Orlesian assholes!” came the cry behind the door. “I’ll butcher you like the pigs you are when I get out of this!”

“Get ready,” said Lavellan and they drew their weapons.

He shouldered the door open and faced Florianne’s expected ambush in the gardens. Lavellan stared unfazed at the line of arrows aimed at him, at the emerald rift’s rippling rip in space. Tied to a post was Gaspard’s mercenary captain struggling against his bindings.

“Inquisitor, what a pleasure,” greeted Florianne, right on time. She looked down from her ledge with a smile, moonlight glinting off her mask. “I wasn’t certain you’d attend.”

“An ambush,” he drawled. “How riveting.”

“You flatter me,” she said with a delicate, practiced laugh. “I hope you know the trouble I went through just to arrange this specially for you. You were such a challenge to read. I wasn’t sure if you’ve taken my bait.”

“And you were a light read on a sunny summer’s day,” he returned. She was too far for him to make out her expression.

“Yet here you are anyway.”

“I thought I’d come see the surprise you’ve prepared for me. Such a poor guest I would be if I didn’t come to critique it. I give a five for originality. Ten for effort.” He smiled. “Out of twenty.”

“My, Inquisitor, that is certainly very generous of you. Such a shame you won’t be around to critique the other surprises I have in store for tonight. After all, Corypheus wishes the empress dead tonight and I would so hate to disappoint him.”

“He should be used to it. That poor thing needs to be humbled every now and again.”

“You are the poor thing,” she sighed. “And so deluded.”

“If I’m so deluded, clear a little something up for me. Why work with Corypheus? You’re royalty. You exercise so much influence over the empire already.”

“The empire? Inquisitor, Corypheus will give me the *world*,” she said and spread her arms. “A world ruled by an attentive god and not an absent one. I will rule Thedas in his name.”

More grand promises. And the greed which made them so susceptible to such promises.

“You are the deluded one then, Grand Duchess,” he said. “As if you don’t understand you’re being played by the very same mechanism you employ. Come now, we’re at odds but I like to think you’re at least smarter than this.”

“I am, Inquisitor. I play the long game.” She turned to leave. “In their darkest dreams, nobody would have expected me to assassinate Celene myself. All I need to do is keep you out of the ballroom long enough to strike. Enjoy the rest of the party, Inquisitor.” She addressed a Venatori and said, “Cut off his marked hand once you’re done. It will make a fine gift for Corypheus.”

Touch it and die.

A Venatori shot an arrow and Lavellan lunged out of the way, came out into a roll and opened the rift. The demons poured out and the true shitshow began.

He shot at the Venatori archers before they could release their arrows and left the demons to Bull and Blackwall. Solas’ barrier shimmered to life around him. Just in time. It deflected an arrow from

an unexpected source, his attacker hiding behind a column before Lavellan could retaliate.

Solas set whoever it was aflame regardless.

Lavellan shot the Venatori who'd crept up behind Solas as thanks.

Once they eliminated the last of the demons and Venatori, Lavellan closed the rift and offered the incensed mercenary captain a job within the Inquisition.

Time was ticking.

They hurried through the palace and its unnecessary corridors and gods, would it kill Orlesians to be *practical*? He kicked open a door into a chapel and encountered more Venatori.

They had to hurry. He needed enough time to let Florianne strike, but not so much that she could change the party theme to red.

Lavellan ran out of arrows.

Oh.

A Venatori threw him against a pew and Lavellan grunted on impact, bow clattering to the floor, quiver digging into his back. Poncey Orlesians could afford gilded walls but couldn't even afford impact-friendly pews? Or at least pews with cushions? Go on and pray to your absent god with your sore and aching asses, pissants.

Blackwall leapt to the rescue, bashed his shield against the Venatori before they could strike Lavellan and felled them with a swift slash. He helped Lavellan out and patted him on the back with a chuckle.

"Everything alright?" he asked.

Lavellan grimaced and clutched at his ribs. "Something's going to bruise and I think my stomach and liver swapped positions but other than that—"

Bull threw the last Venatori against a pew and it shattered from the force of his throw.

"Better than that guy," said Lavellan and retrieved his bow. "Come on, we have to hurry."

They exited the chapel into an empty part of the palace, their footsteps echoing. They were all a mess. Blackwall's neat beard braid and tied hair had come undone while Bull had a rip in his coat. Solas had lost the hat. All of them had broken the *no blood on the uniform* rule.

"Where the fuck are we?" asked Bull. "Everything looks the same."

"I know. It's like it'd kill them to use something other than marble," Lavellan muttered.

"Inquisitor," someone called. Lavellan turned his head and found Cap in one of the corridors. "This way!"

They followed Cap through the confusing hallways.

"How'd you know to find us?" Lavellan asked.

"Somebody heard fighting and we figured you might be in trouble," they said.

“Where’s Florianne?”

“She entered the ballroom and she’s waiting for the empress’ address.”

Music from the orchestra drifted faintly in the air. His heart jumped in relief.

“How long before the Empress’ address?” he asked.

“Few more minutes.” They turned a sharp corner. “This way’s faster.” Cap led them down a set of stairs into a large, open room. The orchestra’s music was louder now. A blue door awaited at the end of the room. Cap unlocked it with a key and the five of them burst into the ballroom.

The guards on either side of the door jolted and a few nobles within the vicinity ogled.

“At ease,” he told the guards. Commander Cullen spotted them and rushed towards Lavellan, eyes wide at their appearance. Leliana and Josephine soon followed.

“Goodness, Inquisitor, what happened?” asked Josephine.

Lavellan met Florianne’s gaze across the ballroom, Gaspard beside her, though he was unaware of Lavellan’s abrupt entrance. Florianne fidgeted. The first crack in her composure. This was why you should always stay to see the job get done.

Florianne and Gaspard began the walk across the ballroom to be received by Empress Celene.

How would Florianne strike? Likely while standing beside Celene, and knowing Florianne’s propensity for the dramatic, it would be during Celene’s speech.

“Inquisitor?” asked Leliana, eyes glinting as she watched him. “Are we continuing with the plan?”

Florianne crossed the ballroom and he opened his mouth to say yes, but the words stuck in his throat.

He fell quiet.

Briala stood in a furtive corner while the nobility gathered around the balustrades to watch, some flooding onto the dance floor as Gaspard and Florianne progressed across it.

That was the plan, wasn’t it? Let Gaspard take the throne, leash him to Briala. Lavellan could do it. He had everything in place. One move and it was checkmate — his win. All the pieces were ready, all the plans, the blackmail required.

And yet.

His hands clenched at his sides as Florianne neared the front of the dance floor. The chatter around him dulled. His heartbeat echoed in his ears.

Topple the King, move the Knight, position his Queen.

But this wasn’t chess.

His eyes widened and an unshakeable chill enclosed around his ankles, wrist, neck.

“Inquisitor?”

Lavellan’s gaze turned frantic as it darted from Florianne, to the empress, and back. Then at his

advisors' waiting looks. His throat seized. Was this... right? Was he right? This was politics. This was how politics worked and this was the ugly truth of it and Celene had to die for his plans to work. Orlais required stability so Corypheus couldn't take advantage of the chaos. They would be stabilised with or without her, and this would give him the early foundations he needed to give the elves more power in Orlais.

To eventually give them a home.

Celene had to die.

Celene had to...

Why?

Now was not the time for his ideals—

Leliana stared at him. Solas was an overwhelming presence behind him. He shot Leliana an uncertain and agitated look and her gaze softened, turned meaningful as she surreptitiously reached into her coat and let the carved nightingale peek over the fabric. Laurel leaves in its claws.

"This is exactly the time for ideals."

Florianne reached the front and Briala descended to join them. They bowed.

Lavellan closed his eyes, resigned.

He swept his arm across the chessboard and let the pieces fall to the floor.

"I hate myself," he muttered and untied his hair, hurriedly fixed it, snapped his coat and straightened it into something presentable, and dashed forward before he could think about it.

"Inquisitor?" Josephine called out.

Lavellan descended onto the dance floor, put his figurative mask in place, and opened his arms in a theatrical display as he called out, "We owe the court one last show, Your Grace."

The nobility gasped at the interruption. Empress Celene tilted her head but said nothing. After all, she, too, enjoyed a good show, and Lavellan had one they could all lap up.

He gathered the strings he'd loosely wrapped around the court tonight.

And pulled.

Florianne turned, posture tense. "Inquisitor," she greeted as he sauntered towards her, played up his confidence and swagger even if his head screamed that this was not part of the plan, that he'd thrown it all away. That everything he'd worked hard for tonight would come crumbling down.

And that he would have become what he never wanted to be.

"Come now, why the frown? This is your party," he said. "Smile, Your Grace. Every eye is upon us. You wouldn't want them to see that you've lost control, would you?" He ascended the steps and she backed away as Briala and Gaspard pulled back.

"Who wouldn't be delighted to speak with you, Inquisitor?" she asked with a forced, demure laugh.

"I don't know, I was left pretty heartbroken when you abruptly cut our lovely garden conversation

short,” he said and paced in circles around her. “Remember? The one where your archers failed to kill me?”

Gasps. Had he not acquired this influence tonight, his words would have meant nothing. At least he knew how to make them eat out of his hands. He hadn’t fucked that up at least.

“Your favour is such a fickle thing to keep. Even for your own family. Framing Gaspard for the murder of a Council of Herald’s emissary?” He reached into his pocket and unsheathed the Chalons dagger, raised it high for the court to see. “My Lords and Ladies, is this not the Chalons crest and dagger?” He threw it onto the dance floor and one picked it up, turned it over.

“It is true!” they cried and handed it to the nearest noble. Gaspard and Florianne’s uncle stepped forward.

“Give me that!” he snapped and examined it. “No... it is true. This dagger can only be retrieved from our personal armoury.” He glanced up at Florianne. “What have you done?”

“That is right,” said another noble. “Dominique has been absent the whole night. He has been murdered!”

The nobles clamoured over the dagger and the wave of whispers became outcries.

Florianne’s composure steadily broke and Gaspard reeled, rage and disbelief in his eyes. Lavellan clasped his hands behind his back, tilted his head and let the light catch on his ear cuffs.

“Your own family?” he asked and shook his head. There was no need to raise his voice. The nobility hushed at the sound, eager for scraps of more spectacle, more scandals and sordid truths. Gluttonous sharks on the scent of blood. “Such an ambitious plan — all your enemies under one roof at your behest.”

There was nothing she could say, not with their uncle’s confirmation of the dagger. Any floundering attempts to lie would be sniffed out immediately and she would be worse off for it.

She took another step back, turned to Gaspard, rattled. Her last defence.

“Gaspard? You cannot believe this! I would—”

Gaspard scoffed at her and turned away. Briala followed, shot Lavellan a questioning look over her shoulder.

“What are you up to?” it seemed to ask.

Lavellan tipped his head. *“We’ll see.”* No room for doubts now because the court would sense him falter. He could falter and scream at himself later in private.

“Gaspard?” Florianne asked, retreated as Orlesian guards advanced towards her. No way out.

“You lost the fight ages ago, Your Grace,” he said and stepped aside to let the guards through. “You’re just the last to find out.”

Florianne sobbed as the guards pulled her up and away. Lavellan glanced up at Celene.

“Your Imperial Majesty, I think we should speak in private,” he said. “Elsewhere.”

Now what, asshole? his thoughts screamed.

Celene nodded and turned with a meaningful tilt of her head. Lavellan took a deep breath and followed.

Well, his plans were shot to shit.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a loaded chapter. Mind you, I WAS going to originally let Lavellan stick to the plan but then it hit me that this goes a little against how I've characterised Lavellan and I was like shit shit revISE. This also ties in better with the whole "don't dance to Orlais' tune" because (get ready for my ramble because I overthink everything) while you could say that he played Orlais by putting an elf in power, that still means he succumbs to the political machinations of Orlais' court in order to do it. It's an illusion of playing Orlais but really, he danced to Orlais' tune all along.

Injecting morals into an environment rife with political manipulation is incredibly difficult, possibly self-destructive, nigh hopeless, and generally a Terrible Idea. Court is where morals go to die. Will Lavellan just end up destroying himself by steadfastly adhering to his morals? Is there a point fighting? Is that all there is? Get swallowed or get destroyed?

Thinking about ethics is probably not what you thought you were getting into with this fic I'm terribly sorry haha. I think it's just intriguing. Also, I'm extra. But hey, you can also just sit back and enjoy the ride and be here for the disastrous yearning. That is also absolutely valid hahaha.

Nov, shut up lmao

Translation

[1] **Ma Venuralas:** My Deity - how the Evanuris are addressed. [\[1\]](#)

The price of hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

broken mirrors, broken hearts—

“Your sister attempted regicide in front of the whole court,” said Briala as they stepped out onto the balcony. Lavellan zoned out of the bickering, his thoughts scrambling for a way to salvage this mess. Celene was alive. Gaspard couldn’t have the throne.

Briala shot him a look at his silence. He'd promised her a throne. Now what?

The elven locket weighed heavily in his pocket once more.

“Enough,” Celene snapped. “We will not bicker while Tevinter plots against our nation! For the safety of the empire, we will have answers.” She glanced at Lavellan for said answers. He stalled by explaining Florianne and Corypheus’ plans.

He refused to reunite Celene and Briala, not after the atrocities Celene had done. A truce between them then? No, that would fall apart and become a political migraine later. He wanted to pull his hair out.

Idiot!

“And,” Lavellan said, “I managed to uncover this plot thanks to Briala.”

Celene’s gaze flicked towards him, startled. “You were working together?”

“Of course,” said Briala, eyeing him. He couldn’t tell if she was angry. He had no idea what he was doing.

Gaspard and Celene couldn’t coexist. Gaspard had to go.

How was that any different? One life for another? Was there no avoiding death?

“Thanks to her help, Gaspard’s mercenary captain will testify that he hired men to infiltrate the palace,” said Lavellan, and laid out all the blackmail he’d acquired, making sure to credit Briala for each one. Well, it was no lie. It was thanks to her and her agents that he'd been able to get around the palace in the first place.

Gaspard’s anger mounted with each accusation.

Celene would execute Gaspard for treason, no doubt. Lavellan could meddle, implore that Gaspard be spared.

No, that wasn’t ideal either. That would still provide instability and Gaspard knew that there was history between Celene and Briala, which would put the Empress on edge. If Gaspard stayed, Briala couldn’t gain any footholds. If Gaspard lived, that was one enemy lurking around with a raging hatred for elves.

Damn it, fool. He'd cornered himself.

“In light of overwhelming evidence, cousin,” said Celene, “we have no choice but to declare you an enemy of the empire. You are hereby sentenced to death.”

Gaspard sneered as the guards seized him.

“You would let the rabbits run amok the empire, Celene?” he asked.

This was what Lavellan was talking about. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, Gaspard, but the ‘rabbits’ are citizens of Orlais,” he said. “The fact that you see them as separate proves you aren’t fit to be leader. Thank you for the invitation though. I hope you aren’t too torn that I foiled your plans with the uniform.”

“And so you finally show your true colours, Inquisitor Lavellan.”

“I’ve shown my true colours from the very beginning. It’s black.” He held Gaspard’s hateful glare as the guards dragged him away. “And I look good in it.”

Celene sighed once Gaspard was gone, a sound so soft he almost missed it, and her shoulders relaxed minutely. Orlais was solely hers once more.

Lavellan shared a look with Briala.

“One other matter,” he said and finally relieved his pocket of the elven locket’s weight. He dangled it from his fingers. The effect was instantaneous. Celene tensed, Briala sucked in a breath. “Does this look familiar to either of you?”

“That is— How did you come to find this?” asked Celene.

“Venatori snooping about your old vault.”

“You kept it?” Briala murmured, eyes wide, and Lavellan scowled.

“Stop,” he said and swung the locket’s pendant into his palms, closed his hand around it. He gave Celene a solemn look. “Your Imperial Majesty, don’t forget that you’re alive and you have your precious empire thanks to the Inquisition’s efforts.”

She pressed her lips. “We will not forget. We are indebted to you. Name your price, Inquisitor, and we shall provide it.”

He held up two fingers. “You owe two things. One to us—” he nodded at Briala—“and one to your empire. What you owe to the empire is your efforts to help stop Corypheus because he threatens the whole of Thedas. This is just a natural obligation at this point.”

“And the other?” she asked, terse.

“Grant Briala the title of Marquise of the Dales,” he said.

Her face stayed carefully neutral. “We see,” she said. “That will be met with opposition.”

“You can pin it on me if the nobles harangue you,” he said. “Or would you really deny me this simple request?”

Briala laughed sharply. “Inquisitor, that is no simple request. Celene would never grant that title to an elf,” she spat.

Hurt glimmered beneath Celene’s eyes at the undercurrent of spite in Briala’s tone.

“What you did to Briala is unforgivable,” he said. “To my people, even more so.”

“You are Dalish,” remarked Celene.

“I’m an elf,” he fired back.

“This will end in bloodshed.”

Briala scoffed. “Please, Celene, I know how to navigate court.”

“Fact is,” said Lavellan, “Briala’s efforts helped you too.” His eyes turned steely. “And you were no saint tonight either. I would rather not blackmail the Empress of Orlais, but know that I can, and I will if pushed.”

Celene eyed him and they stayed in a tense silence. Lavellan kept his gaze steady.

“You did not just come here to stop Corypheus,” she noted.

He stayed quiet.

She smiled faintly. “Then your part in the Game will not end tonight, Inquisitor.”

“No,” he agreed.

“We may meet again. Will we find you opposing us at the end of the board?”

“This is not chess.”

Celene regarded him. “No,” she agreed as well and transferred her look to Briala. “And you?”

“I have long been a player in your game, Celene,” she said. “Don’t cry because I started a game of my own.”

She smiled, but it was hollow and tired. The crown and throne exacted its price, and Celene had been bearing it for long. Despicable as she could be, he respected her tenacity at least.

“We will heed your request,” she said, “but we trust that you are both prepared for the consequences.”

Briala crossed her arms in defiance. Lavellan matched the grim look Celene gave him and they momentarily sized one another up. A possible future opponent.

“You will haunt my dreams, Inquisitor,” said Celene. “Do I have a place in yours?”

“Apologies,” he said, not at all apologetic, “but my dreams are haunted by a wolf, not an empress.”

She made no reply to the cryptic answer but Briala frowned slightly. Celene tipped her head towards the ballroom where they were quickly immersed back into the uncertain and fraught atmosphere.

“Nevertheless, thank you for your efforts tonight, Inquisitor,” said Celene. “Come stand with us. We must deliver the good news to the nobility.”

Celene addressed the nobles while Briala and Lavellan stood slightly back during her speech.

“Let the cornerstone of change be laid,” announced Celene as she gestured Briala forward. “We

introduce the newest member of our court: Marquise Briala of the Dales.”

Briala delivered a speech that painted a unified force of humans and elves, which pandered to the idealistic and triumphant atmosphere of the evening. Lavellan clenched his hands behind his back. Was this really the best he could do? Was this the next best course? The loss of Gaspard’s life still twisted his stomach.

Had there ever been a better course to take?

“Inquisitor, will you address the court?” asked Celene.

He’d rather not, but alas. He gave a rallying speech, made his expression and voice convincing even if he felt like garbage inside.

“But that is tomorrow,” said Celene. “Tonight, we celebrate! Let the festivities commence!”

The ballroom cheered. The three of them stepped back and Celene parted with a final nod, her gaze lingering on Briala, but they said nothing more to one another.

“If you will excuse us,” said Celene. “This night has been long and we wish to retire for the evening. We will speak again in the morning.

Lavellan bowed. “Your Imperial Majesty.”

Celene left, escorted by two guards. Lavellan waited for a few seconds before he gestured one of the Inquisition scouts over.

They saluted. “Worship?”

He nodded at Celene. “Make sure she makes it to her bedroom without being assassinated.”

“Yes, Your Worship.”

“Be subtle.”

They grinned. “I’m always subtle, Your Worship.”

He smiled back. “Go on.”

Briala moved to leave as well but he cleared his throat meaningfully and nodded at a quiet corner.

“A word?” he asked.

“Conversing in a shadowy corner? What *will* the nobility say?”

“Nothing they haven’t already started saying,” he snorted as they moved to said shadowy corner, half-obsured by a ridiculously sized potted plant. Lavellan assessed Briala’s body language. Tense. “Are you angry?”

“Whatever for?”

“I promised you a throne.”

She crossed her arms, lips pursing. “Admittedly, I did think you had backpedalled on your promises, but you tried very hard to pin your successes on me.”

"It's true," he said.

"I suspect you would have still fared alright with or without our meddling." She frowned. "What price are you after?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You must want something in return for the power you granted me," she said. "It may not be the throne, but it is still significant."

"I want you to help the elves of Orlais. That's it."

Her frown deepened. "That can't be all of it."

"I may need your help later, when this mess with Corypheus ends."

"When," she repeated. "You seem confident."

Lavellan smiled. "I am what they call *idiotically optimistic*."

She laughed, at least. "That, you are. But alright, Inquisitor. I have a standing debt, then." Her expression turned troubled. "But Celene is right about one thing: my title will come with opposition. Perhaps later rather than sooner, but it's still inevitable."

"Nothing lasts," he said, "but do what you can with this time while the Inquisition is at its prime and able to provide you support. By the end of the year, maybe two, you need to be able to fly on your own."

"Inquisitor, I will fly in half that time."

That startled a laugh out of him. "Very good, Marquise."

"Marquise Briala. Doesn't quite roll on the tongue, does it?"

"Ah, I had no idea that was a concern," said Lavellan. They shared a chuckle before falling silent.

He grew acutely aware of the elven locket in his pocket once more.

Lavellan reached into his pocket with a frown and retrieved the locket, the glint of it catching Briala's eye. He offered it. She took it gingerly as if it would combust and scorch her palm, her thumb tracing the edges of it.

"It's not my place to meddle," he said. "Do with it as you will. Deal with Celene however you see fit. Just remember that she's an empress and a survivor before anything else."

Her hand closed over it. "I wish I had known that sooner," she murmured. "But thank you."

There was another span of silence and Lavellan looked out at the ballroom and the merriment now in full swing. Such opulence. Yet all he saw was the festering sore it hid.

"You know," said Briala, "you remind me of someone, Inquisitor."

"Oh?"

"Another strange Dalish elf," she said, fondness colouring her eyes and tone. "He was a mentor to me. His name was Felassan. You wouldn't happen to know him, would you?"

Lavellan smiled sadly without meaning to. "I haven't seen him in a long time."

Her eyes sparked, expression lighting up while his heart shrivelled.

"You're a friend of his?" she asked.

"Yes," he said and found that he meant it. There were brief flickers of emotions — mirth, fondness, exasperation, support. Laughter chimed in his head. "He's gotten me into more trouble than he's worth a few times."

Briala snorted. "That does sound like him." Her look softened. "I wonder if he would be proud of what I've managed."

"He would be," said Lavellan. "He believed in you."

"And how would you know this if you haven't seen him in a while?"

"Just the kind of person he is." *He betrayed Fen'Harel for you.*

Briala looked out the window, gaze saddening, no doubt missing Felassan. She shook her head. "In any case, thank you for tonight. It may not have gone according to plan but..." She tightened her grip around the locket. "You have secured a way for me to help our people." Lavellan blinked. Our. That was... nice.

He pushed aside the tangle of emotions pressing against his ribs.

"Good luck, Marquise," he said. "And I know they've been hostile but please watch over the Dalish too. You've only met one clan, right? Maybe I can introduce you to the nicer ones, another time."

"Another time. Is your clan like you?"

"Most. I mean there's about a hundred and something of us and obviously some are assholes, but we're a reasonable lot. They're in a bit of trouble with the nobles of Wycome at the moment. Got framed for some bogus illness that was actually red lyrium poisoning."

"Do you need me to intervene?" asked Briala.

"No, I've got it for now, thank you."

She nodded. "If you ever do require my help, you need only ask." He must have made a vulnerable face because she offered him a kind smile. "Inquisitor... how long has it been since you've been among elves who considered you their people?"

He laughed brokenly. "Not in a damn long time. You... You're the first to have said 'our people'. The Dalish think I've been too influenced by the humans, but with the humans, I'm a Dalish. My two elven friends don't—" He shook his head. "It's been a while."

"I know a little of how you feel," she said. Even with the elves of Orlais, Briala had been apart due to her previous position as Celene's handmaid.

"Probably more than a little," he said. "It's a thankless job. But we get it done."

She made an agreeing noise before one of the elven servants whispered for Briala's attention.

"Duty calls," she said and bowed. Lavellan bowed back. "Good luck, Inquisitor Lavellan."

Once Briala was gone, Lavellan sighed and ran his hands through his hair, defenceless against the onslaught of raging, self-deprecating shrieks in his head. He asked one of the servants to return his bow to his reserved room then sought an unoccupied balcony for fresh air.

Morrigan arrived shortly. Either she'd had the same idea or she'd been waiting for him to be alone.

He still wasn't sure how to feel about her, but he couldn't deny that she'd been a great help during the fight against Solas. They'd embarked on a project together to record the knowledge that the Well of Sorrows possessed, though their sessions had always been disrupted. Planning battles tended to do that.

"Shouldn't you be dancing with the nobility, Inquisitor?" asked Morrigan as she stood beside him. "'Tis your victory we celebrate, after all."

"I'm a little tired of dances." He said and braced his arms against the railing.

"You tire of popularity so quickly?"

"Oh I've been popular for about half a year now. It got old after the first two minutes, believe me."

He was semi-present for the rest of that conversation so he wasn't sure what half-hearted quips they'd traded, but as before, it ended with him welcoming her into the Inquisition. Morrigan bowed out after their conversation.

That left him alone with his thoughts once more.

The elation that had buoyed him the entire night, once golden in his veins, now thickened into the poison that it was. How long until Orlais twisted him? Until the atmosphere, the double-dealing, the scheming, and the Game turned him away from the principles he'd resolved to never stray from again?

He stared up at the stars as if they would have the answer.

If it weren't for Leliana, he would have let Celene die and would've patted himself on the back for a job well done. There was something hilarious in that. That it was Leliana who reminded him.

Footsteps neared. Lavellan already knew whose they were because who fucking else?

Solas leaned back against the railing. Lavellan expected a scolding, something scornful or mocking for deviating from the plan, maybe even amusement.

But all Solas did was softly ask, "Talk to me? What are you thinking?"

That... He hadn't expected that.

"You were so certain the whole night," continued Solas. "Then you... changed your mind, and it did not come without grief."

Lavellan fiddled with the edge of his gloves, pulled them off and shoved them into his pockets, let the wind cool the heated skin. He blew off strands of his hair which had slipped out of their arrangement and had fallen over his eyes. They kept falling back. He grumbled.

"Lethallin," Solas warned, sensing his stalling.

He huffed, expression turning bitter. "I hate Orlais, I hate the Game, I hate court."

Solas made a soft, disbelieving noise. “Yet you excelled at it. You had an entire empire wrapped around your smallest finger. It even looked as if you were enjoying yourself.”

“And that’s the problem,” said Lavellan. “You’re right, I enjoyed myself. I felt alive.” He looked back at the open door, observed the snippets of celebration that he could glimpse. Lavellan chewed on his lip and turned away. “And I got carried away. This whole empire is poison. It tastes nice for the first few sips before it settles into something heavy and by the time you notice, it’s in your system and you’re choking.” Lavellan snorted. “Dramatic of me, I know.”

“Though not entirely incorrect,” he said. “Is that why you changed course?”

“If I had let Celene die, I would’ve betrayed my principles. I would’ve surrendered to the Game’s machinations.” He buried his head in his hands. “But was that selfish of me? Would I have put Briala and the elves in a better position if I let Celene die? Did I screw up a perfectly good plan by putting on my holier-than-thou bullshit? I don’t know, Solas.”

Cheers erupted from within the ballroom. Late nights would always make parties rowdier.

“Duty or principle,” said Solas, “and you chose principle. When cornered, you always seem to choose principle.”

“Not always,” he murmured, mind flashing back to the times he’d held a list of names. Of their fallen. And over the years, he’d stopped seeing names, instead saw how many lines there were, how many pages. “Not that it mattered. I traded one death for another.”

“It is not the same,” said Solas.

“Isn’t it?”

“You are not so naïve as to think that you can save everyone. You have long come to terms with this.” His voice softened. “No matter how much you may wish to save as many as you can. The Grand Duke and Empress cannot coexist. The stability will not last long, and you would cause yourself and Briala further stress. You know this.”

“I could have intervened,” said Lavellan. “Saved Gaspard. I hold no fondness for him but...”

“And he holds no fondness for you in return. Or elves for that matter. Had he lived, the elves of Orlais would not be safe. *You* would not be safe.”

“I’m never safe.”

“All the more reason to lessen those who would seek to hurt you.”

Lavellan pressed his lips tight. He knew that, he *knew*. Was it the case of choosing the lesser evil? Gaspard was a warmonger and as soon as things with Corypheus settled, he would likely have turned his gaze towards Ferelden. Celene was more pragmatic. More inclined to stay her hand unless it was pushed.

At his silence, Solas asked, “Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“This. It is not... It is self-destructive.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He raised his head slightly, angled it towards Solas. “I promised I

wouldn't let war or politics remove the individual value of life."

Solas stared at him and the quiet between them spun into a conversation of its own that neither of them were privy to.

"You are frightening," Solas finally said.

Lavellan frowned. "Why?"

"Because I see in you the capacity to become a monster," said Solas. "The worst kind. A cunning one. You can make others love you far too easily, isolate your enemies and strip them of their defences while you smile. It would be too late when they realise."

Lavellan wasn't certain whether to treat that as a compliment or an insult.

How about you, Solas? Do I make you love me far too easily?

"You overestimate me, I think," said Lavellan.

"I estimate you the right amount." Solas glanced at the door, eyes stormy with indecipherable thoughts. "Only your kindness and compassion still your hand."

"Do I frighten you?"

"More than anyone else."

A cool breeze swept past.

"In any case," said Solas as if he didn't just say the most confusing set of statements back to back like a gallery of mental slaps, "the Grand Duke knew what to expect when he wagered his life for the crown. Remember, but do not dwell. You cannot save people from themselves."

Lavellan bristled. That was the last thing he wanted to hear from Solas of all people.

"You can give it a shot," he said.

His eyes grew melancholy and Lavellan hated it. "You could," he said. "But you have thrown your previous plans into disarray. How will you accomplish your goals now? The title of Marquise is significant, and to some extent, you have returned the Dales to the elves, but you see now how deeply ingrained the maltreatment of elves is into Orlesian society." Lavellan had always seen.

"An empire is always built on the back of slaves," Lavellan muttered.

"Slaves," echoed Solas, a wry smile pulling at his lips. "I believe the Orlesians call them *servants*. Slavery is a dreadful practice, so they claim, and abolished it."

"Yet fascinatingly, the servants are treated no better. They seem to forget that those *servants* outnumber them."

"Careful, that almost sounds dissentious. You have eliminated two enemies among the royals. You do not wish to make another."

Lavellan glanced at him. "I'm going to haunt her dreams, she says. I'm halfway there."

He sighed. "I take my eyes off you for *five* seconds..."

“Don’t worry, I’m not here to start a rebellion. Nobody is in any position to start something like that, but at least I can relax a little knowing Briala has a handle on things here.”

His expression soured. “I do not understand how you can entrust something of this magnitude to her.”

“She cares. She wants change, and I think she can deliver it. They’re stronger than you think.” He stared at the stars again. “*We’re stronger than you think. Give us a chance. Let us try first.*”

“Your strength, I do not doubt. It takes incredible willpower to remain steadfast to your beliefs in the face of a world who would seek to pervert you.”

“I have a terrible feeling you’re taking the wrong message from this.” Because it felt as if Solas was saying, *I am the weak one*. “And do you not see the strength in the elves of Halamshiral? The flames of a fight still linger even after Celene tried to stamp it out. Even as the rest of the world turns their back on them. They fight with all they have. They persevere.”

“Do you ever just take a compliment?” Solas asked.

“Answer the damn question.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he snapped, then reined it in and calmed himself with a few breaths. He tried again.

“Because you look like you’re giving up on this world. Because it feels as if we don’t matter to you because we are not *your* people.”

His gaze hardened. “I apologise if I don’t feel up to involving myself with those who have shunned or scorned me.”

“What about Clan Venalin?” challenged Lavellan. “The elves in Skyhold? Don’t think I don’t see you swinging by to converse magical theory with Grand Enchanter Fiona and some of the apprentices.” He paused, gaze dropping. His voice lowered into something hesitant. “What about me?”

A soft, torn breath left Solas. “V— Lethallin, of course you matter to me.”

“And the rest?”

“You are different.”

“No.” Lavellan looked down at the marble railing, traced the veined patterns on its surface.

“Others are different too, once you take the time to get to know them. I’m sorry you were never given the opportunity with the Dalish, I’m sorry you met those who turned you away. Please understand they were just afraid. It might... take a bit more work. But it’s worth it. We’re worth it.”

“How are you so—” Solas muttered a few indiscernible words to himself as he paced and sighed. Many sighs this evening. It was just that kind of night, and Lavellan couldn’t help but smile to himself. Behold: an elven god caught in a moral and emotional dilemma.

He took pity after a while and placed a firm yet gentle hand on Solas’ shoulder, which stilled his pacing. Solas frowned at him.

“It’s alright,” said Lavellan. “It’ll be alright.”

“You cannot promise that.”

“It’s not a promise, it’s a reassurance.” Laughter in the ballroom caught their attention. Lavellan let go of his shoulder and leaned against the railing once more. “But let’s save that discussion for another time. It’s been a long night already.”

“An understatement,” said Solas, but at least he stayed beside Lavellan. “And no matter the emotional grief involved—” Lavellan snorted— “tonight was still a victory against Corypheus. Your exposure of Grand Duchess Florianne was masterful. Nobody could tear their gaze away from you.” He eyed Lavellan. “Where does a Dalish elf learn to manipulate an imperial court?”

“Josephine Montilyet’s office,” he said. “Where does an elven apostate learn to sneak about court well enough to smuggle weapons in?”

“The Fade,” replied Solas. Lavellan gave him a saccharine smile.

“Ah, then let us thank our brilliant teachers.”

But Solas wasn’t one to leave certain things alone.

“It occurs to me that I barely know anything about your past,” he said.

Lavellan met his intent stare. “Nor I yours.”

“What Dalish clan would have ever encountered a Qunari, much less spend enough time with them for you to develop such a close bond?”

“Been sitting on that one for long, have you?”

Solas smiled and Lavellan huffed.

“Many extraordinary things happen every day,” said Lavellan. “A Dalish clan encountering a Qunari is hardly one of them.”

“You know more Elvish than most Dalish,” he continued.

What was this, interrogate Lavellan time? Lavellan raised a brow. “Clan Lavellan is a very old clan, one of the first I believe, and we have amassed a significant amount of lore and knowledge. You’ll find that most in the clan have an extended Elvish vocabulary.”

“Yet there’s an almost imperceptible shift in your accent.”

Shit, there was? He kept his expression neutral despite this even as Solas’ interrogative gaze searched Lavellan like a puzzle, seeking hidden latches or weak points.

“The Dalish diaspora resulted in regional changes to Elvish,” returned Lavellan smoothly. “And as you said, it’s almost imperceptible.”

“You fight like no Dalish hunter.” Well, Solas was *not* letting up tonight either, was he?

“Admittedly, most of your forms are based off Dalish styles, but the way you integrate them into battle would be considered unorthodox. You have shaped them for war.”

“I kind of had to? Fighting demons and ancient beings claiming godhood was a little unprecedented for me.”

“Even in Haven when the Breach was newly formed.”

“And how do you know that I have shaped them for war?” Lavellan fired back. “I see you and your martial forms.”

“I learned it in—”

“The Fade,” he cut off irritably. “Everything is conveniently from the Fade with you.”

He chuckled, eyes sharp as he assessed Lavellan. “The Fade houses common and esoteric knowledge alike. One need only know where to look.”

“And you know where to look, do you?”

“I do,” he said.

They had grown closer, arms touching as they rested them on the railing. Lavellan hadn’t realised. Neither made a move to pull back.

“Lost the hat?” Lavellan asked and shifted the topic. Solas narrowed his eyes at the subject change but he went with it. That conversation was getting dangerous for them both. Solas had secrets of his own to keep too, and if he’d continued prying, Lavellan would have found a way to turn the conversation on its head and put Solas on the spot instead. Even more so, anyway.

“A Venatori knocked it off my head and a Rage demon set fire to it.”

“Dorian must be pleased.”

“He was. I thought of burning his hair but refrained.”

Lavellan’s shoulders shook with soft laughter. “Well I thank you for your restraint.”

Solas smiled at him. Another round of applause and cheers from inside caught their attention.

“It’s that time of night,” mused Lavellan. “Have the stingy Orlesians finally brought out their finest cask?”

“It would appear so.” He stared at the door, head tilted in thought, then pushed off the railing and worked his gloves off. After draping them over the railing, he offered his hand and bowed.

Lavellan’s heart dropped yet flew at the same time.

“May I have this dance, Inquisitor Lavellan?”

He'd offered last time, too. Had dragged Lavellan to the middle of the dance floor with the court watching their every move as they engaged in a dance that matched the sensuous and nigh provocative music the orchestra had swapped to. Everyone was drunk at that point so his reputation mattered little by then.

And after...

The door shuddered in its frame as Lavellan kicked it close in his haste, Solas’ hungry hands gripping and pulling him close.

“I think I deserve a reward for a job well done,” Lavellan whispered.

Solas backed him against the door. “The dance was your reward. Allow me to indulge myself instead.” His thigh slipped between Lavellan’s and pressed. Lavellan’s breath stuttered. Solas’

gaze sharpened, pinning him. "I have all night."

That had been... an excellent end to the day.

Focus!

He shook off those memories and placed his hand in Solas' despite his better judgement.

"Trying to catch the band while they're playing?" Lavellan asked and praised himself for the smooth delivery. Solas smiled, raised his other hand, and a gust of wind pushed the balcony doors closed, cutting off the music. Lavellan blinked. "Okay, we're off to a suspicious and ominous start." This was new.

"You have had enough of Orlais for tonight," said Solas and Lavellan scrunched his face in agreement. Solas pulled him closer. Lavellan went without a struggle. "I wish to teach you a dance. A dance from Elvhenan."

This was *very* new.

"I make for a poor dance student," Lavellan said. "The amount of times I stepped on my instructor's toes just so I could dance with Florianne properly is astounding."

"I promise it is a simple dance," said Solas, smile growing. Probably at the thought of Lavellan stepping on people's toes. "I believe the dagger fighting style you employ is derived from this dance. Most of it should come naturally to you."

"A fighting style stemmed from a ballroom dance?" he asked as Solas stood behind him and rested both his hands on Lavellan's hips. Lavellan's heart froze mid-beat.

"Why do you reason it is called the Water Dance? After all, what is a battle if not another form of dance?" He guided Lavellan's arms into position. "Do the footwork and motions according to the first form slowly. I will guide your movements." Lavellan did so while Solas matched his strides and made slight adjustments, fleeting touches, his presence behind Lavellan both an unyielding blanket and a pliant wall.

Once they finished the form, Solas turned him by the hips, fingers digging into the crest of Lavellan's hipbones for half a second. Lavellan's hands rested on Solas' shoulders without prompt, guided by a distant and faded memory.

"Is this right?" Lavellan asked, resisted grimacing at his floundering. He'd begun this night in control, now look at him — uncertain and unmoored. Maybe he had his strings secure around the court, but what of the strings holding himself together? Then again, those had frayed since long ago.

"Yes," said Solas as they began a circuit of steps that Lavellan could follow. Whether because it held the hints of the Water Dance or because his body remembered something his mind could not, he wasn't certain. This dance had no pauses like the Orlesian vales. It was a continuous motion, filled with divergences and convergences, stepping away from your partner to dance your own steps, but always returning to the other. Always.

They danced in the silence, but the ghosts of a memory whispered in Lavellan's head. Impressions of notes and colours. The swirl of cloth and ornate tiles. Gone in a breath.

"Excellent, you have learned the steps," said Solas as they reunited at the circuit's conclusion.

Lavellan laughed, more a breath than a proper sound. “I could almost hear the music in my head. Almost. It’s a little abstract.”

Solas smiled. “You did not think I would let you dance to just silence, did you?”

The Veil fluttered around them like the light brush of a butterfly’s wings, and the air shimmered briefly as [the faint plucks of a harp](#) drifted in the air. Lavellan glanced around in search of the source, but the alluring melody slipped — blithe and transient threads in the margins of his senses. He cast Solas a questioning look.

Without warning, Solas grasped Lavellan’s hand and spun him skilfully. Lavellan yelped and suspected he only stayed upright because of Solas.

He pulled Lavellan closer. “Shall we?” he asked and Lavellan nodded, breathless, and his hands settled on Solas’ shoulders again.

And once again, they were moving, moving, moving. Seamless and weaving. Two currents of water meeting, swerving, the harp’s melody cascading like a gentle waterfall. He fell into the rhythm and the music.

Whenever they reunited, their bodies remained just shy of meeting, paralleled but never encountering.

Lavellan swapped roles and slipped behind Solas at the conclusion of a circuit. He placed his hands on Solas’ hips and resisted gripping onto it for dear life if only to moor himself.

“May I lead this time?” Lavellan asked and Solas chuckled.

“As you wish.”

He turned Solas for the next step and it took all his focus to not tug Solas closer, to push aside any stray thoughts and memories of moments just like this.

“Was this a common ballroom dance?” asked Lavellan so he could stay sane.

“No. It was only performed during specific occasions.”

“Such as?”

Solas’ eyes gleamed. “After victory.”

They separated, danced around one another as though in orbit, then Lavellan pulled Solas close again. Too hard. They collided and knocked the breaths out of their chests.

Lavellan winced. “Sorry.”

“I will not fault you for enthusiasm,” laughed Solas.

“You should probably take the lead again before I end up concussing either you or myself.”

“You were managing quite well, in my opinion.” Nevertheless, Solas led the dance again.

The music swelled. After all the spins, the separations, and the subsequent convergences, the distance between them lessened to the point that Lavellan felt the traces of caustic lightning from Solas’ magic flickering over areas where they touched.

As the harp slowed, Solas travelled his hand up and around Lavellan's side to rest it at the small of his back, left a faint ripple of shivers in its wake.

"Let one hand go," Solas whispered.

He obliged, pulled one of his hands away as Solas gently dipped him.

"Angle your head slightly and reach for the floor. Don't worry. I have you."

He did so, back arching as the harp plucked its last running melody, his fingers brushing against the marble tiles. They held the position until the final two notes, then Solas eased him back up and Lavellan's hand returned to Solas' shoulder.

They stayed like that for a moment, his gaze resting on Solas' coat buttons because he still couldn't hold eye contact, both slightly breathless.

It was the exertion, he told himself. The dance was simple and elegant but unforgiving. It was the exertion.

"Well done," murmured Solas. "Thank you for humouring my request."

Lavellan smiled, heart pounding, pressing. "Thank you for teaching me. Even if I crashed into you a few times."

Solas chuckled. "As I said, I will not fault you for enthusiasm."

A charged, uncertain silence hung between them. Solas didn't let go. Neither did Lavellan.

He finally mustered up the courage to look Solas in the eye. Solas' grip on Lavellan's hips tightened for another half-second.

"You have stared down the most vicious of Orlais' monsters," said Solas, "yet you seem to have difficulty meeting my eyes."

"The eyes give many things away," he said, averted his gaze without meaning to. "It's a little easier to hide vulnerabilities when you stare at monsters. And I've already—I think you've seen me cry more than most people. That's... a little embarrassing on my end, I'm sorry."

Solas sighed. "And as I have told you before, I do not think any lesser of you for it. You have always needed to maintain a strong front for everyone. You have been their pillar of strength." His grip on Lavellan's hips tightened once more, as if he could single-handedly keep him from unravelling, and Lavellan could almost believe he could. Solas was both unraveller and preserver. "But you are no marble statue. Some seem to forget you are merely flesh and bone, that you shed tears just as they do. Sometimes *you* seem to forget this, too. You are allowed to feel, Mahanon. It is not secession."

"Tiring, isn't it?" Lavellan mumbled. "Feeling?"

Something in Solas' voice saddened. "I did not say it wasn't."

He glanced up at Solas again. What did Solas see when he looked into Lavellan's eyes?

Another silence hung, begged to be filled with anything other than words.

The door burst open and the sudden light and ambient chatter startled them, saved them from making any further choices. Lavellan leapt back. Solas stayed in place and let his arms fall calmly

by his sides.

“Quisitree!” yelled Sera, a giddy grin on her face. “There you are! You gotta see—” She broke off into a giggling fit as she pointed behind her, voice slurring. “Bull’s got— Horns! Got ‘em stuck in proper. It’s friggin’ good, it is. You gotta see!” She hiccupped and dashed off again, left Lavellan staring wide-eyed at her retreating back.

He looked back at Solas, gesturing inside. “I should... make sure the children are behaving.”

“I guarantee you they are not.”

Lavellan laughed, then grimaced at the crash from inside. Creators, what were they getting up to this time? He stared at Solas, hesitant to leave him, but Solas waved him off with a mild smile.

“Go on. I’m sure you would prefer to leave Orlais without having to pay the empress for breaking her porcelains.”

“I’ll just remind her I saved her life,” scoffed Lavellan. His joking expression eased into something sincere. “Thank you. For the dance.”

Solas tipped his head, smiling. “You are welcome. And I hope you keep my earlier words in mind.”

“I— I’ll try.”

Lavellan’s gaze fell on Sera balanced atop a stack of chairs, holding a cake platter above her head. He balked.

“Sera, no! No, put that down!” he scolded and sprinted inside.

He managed to talk her out of freediving off the chair pile, then helped pull Bull’s horns out from a keg because he’d tried to show off in front of Dorian.

After wrangling the Inquisition members into some semblance of ‘behaved’, Lavellan retreated to a corner where he let his smile drop. He rubbed his face. He’d rejected offers to join the afterparty, too drained and exhausted.

Vergala flew in and perched on his shoulders. He rubbed the underside of her beak with a tired smile.

“Been helping the Inquisition soldiers, I hear,” he said and she fluffed her feathers in pride. “Well done, clever girl. Now then, I think it’s time to crash into a bed and stare at a ceiling for six hours while regretting all of my life choices.”

He followed the directions back to the Guest Quarters and relished the quiet of the corridors, the sounds of merriment growing fainter.

“Tonight has been very long,” he said. Vergala soothed him by butting her head against his cheek.

In the quiet, his mind returned to the dance.

It was extraordinary how much you could miss someone even if they were right in front of you.

Lavellan focused on the Well of Sorrow’s whispers instead for background noise. When did the collective will of Mythal’s devotees stop being an ominous nuisance and more of a comforting presence?

He was tied to three Evanuris. This was just fantastic.

“—you mean it’s not working?”

“Briala can’t enter!”

Lavellan stopped. He slipped behind a statue beneath an alcove just as two hassled elves turned the corner and swept past him in furious whispers.

“But we need the eluvians! Most of our supplies are there!”

“Maybe it’s broken?”

“It can’t be. Briala thinks they may have been blocked.”

“By who? Even if they had the phrase, they don’t have the keystone to take the network.”

“Magic, maybe?”

Lavellan’s stomach dropped. Everything fell into place.

Solas being late after arranging the caches, his demeanour for the entire night, teaching Lavellan a dance of *victory*. Lavellan had always assumed that Solas had taken Briala’s eluvians after he’d left the Inquisition but gods, Lavellan was an *idiot*. He was the one who gave Solas the job of securing the caches tonight. He was the one who made it even easier.

Solas wasn’t just celebrating the Inquisition’s victory.

“Oh, you fool,” he hissed at himself.

He chased after the two elves. “Excuse me?” he called out and they started, but quickly recovered, plastering on amiable smiles.

“Inquisitor Lavellan. Is there something you needed?”

“Can you lead me to Briala, please? I need to speak to her. It’s urgent.”

“I’m afraid she’s busy—”

“You’re having eluvian problems?” he asked, which gave them pause. He nodded. “As I thought. Please, let me have a look.”

“Do you think you can help?”

“We’ll see,” he said.

They shared a look, then nodded at him. Lavellan followed them down the corridor and through a series of hidden passages reserved for servants for easy navigation and to keep them out of sight. It exited into a corridor where Briala and an entourage of elves were gathered in discussion.

Briala looked up at Lavellan’s approach. Her mask was off now, the dark curls of her hair escaping from her hairpins.

“Problem after problem tonight, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” she said in genuine surprise.

“So then,” he said, expression grim, “I hear you’ve been having eluvian issues.”

Chapter End Notes

Geez, Lavellan just can't catch a break.

A lot of you were looking forward to the dance so I hope I did it justice! Especially since it's so iconic. I linked in the music I had in mind while they were dancing but [here it is again](#) if you chose not to open it just yet.

Also, so it doesn't cause confusion because it totally confused me the first time I heard it in-game, Celene speaks with the majestic plural, so instead of saying "I", she says "we" to denote that she's also speaking as the leader of Orlais. There's one line where she deliberately drops the majestic plural though.

(Honestly, Solas this entire night was just: *heart eyes*)

I read the "Solas took the eluvians during Halamshiral" theory on the Dumped Drunk and Dalish blog which some of you are probably familiar with because it's where I go for all things Solas lmaO. Anyway, I have now adopted it as my headcanon too. Solas was sipping on his wine because he got the eluvians *and* his vhenan obliterated Orlesian court, what a good night.

Of overlapping images

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

blurring our visages—

“You know about the eluvians?” Briala asked, eyes narrowing.

“My clan came across one,” he lied. “Although it wasn’t working at the time. My sister is a Dreamer, so she was able to dream and see what they were once used for. I may be able to lend some assistance.”

“You think?”

He shrugged. “Worth a shot, right?”

Briala looked at the elves around her with a silent question and they nodded. She signalled for him to follow and he fell into step beside her as the others trailed close behind.

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

“Are you aware of how it works?”

“Transports you to another realm where you can access more eluvians. Quick travel.”

She nodded. “The network has a central labyrinth where the holder of the keystone can take ownership of it. Whoever owns the network can sense each eluvian within it and where they lead, and they can open or close them at will.” She frowned at him. “But now the eluvian in the palace has been blocked and I can’t open it even with the keystone or passphrase.”

They entered a simple room — as simple as Orlesian nobility could get anyway — and there, propped up against the furthest wall, was an eluvian, its surface dull and faded.

“We use the network to get food to alienages, to store supplies, to warn others in danger from the civil war,” explained Briala, “or even to sabotage Gaspard or Celene’s armies. Anything and everything we could use it for.” Her eyes turned flinty as she laid her hand upon its surface. “We may not need to worry about the civil war anymore, but it’s still convenient and it gives us a safe space to retreat to.”

His fists clenched by his sides. What did Solas say last time about the eluvians? He’d had to personally override it with his magic?

“So the only way someone could enter this eluvian is if they have the passphrase?” he asked.

“Or if I open it for them.” She put her hand to her chin in thought. “Although, I sensed that three eluvians reopened just a few minutes before you arrived.”

“Where do those three open eluvians lead?”

“One to the Val Royeaux alienage, one to the Halamshiral slums, and one to our main supplies.”

Had Solas left a few open last time? No, he’d assumed complete control.

The other servants fidgeted behind them, aflutter from worry and confusion. Lavellan shot them a brief glance. Some of Briala's agents could be Solas'. They could have retrieved the passphrase and told him.

The eluvian's dull surface shimmered.

Briala started and retracted her hand. Everyone stared at the eluvian, breaths held.

Colours burst on its surface then settled into calm, rolling ripples of blue. Opened once again. The others murmured in relief.

"Was that your doing?" Lavellan asked.

"No," said Briala. "I told you, I can sense them but I can't control their access."

Then they couldn't celebrate just yet. "When did you realise it was blocked?"

"After our earlier conversation when the afterparty began," said Briala and her lips twisted. "I was too distracted the entire night to notice, not until the others came to fetch me. They said the eluvians wouldn't open with the passphrase. Nobody saw anyone come and go recently."

No, they wouldn't have. Lavellan theorised that Solas had done it while he'd been attending to the caches, so that was earlier in the night.

Briala's expression pulled in concentration. "I'll go in and investigate."

"I'll go with you," he said. "It could be dangerous. I just need a weapon."

He didn't trust that he could speak as freely as he would like here. Not when he didn't know who these servants were and who they owed their allegiances to.

Briala narrowed her eyes. "I'll be fine."

"I didn't go through the trouble of granting you a title just to see you die before you can even spend a day in your new job."

She stared at him, frown deepening, but her shoulders slacked and she sighed.

"Fine," she muttered and nodded at one of the servants. One of them stepped forward and lent Lavellan two daggers.

"Thank you," he said and strapped them to his hips.

"Stay here," said Briala to the others. "Keep an eye out for trouble."

Briala and Lavellan stepped through the eluvian, the magic washing over their skin, prickling and spraying as they passed, and then—

Home.

The light cleared and Lavellan stepped into the Crossroads, though it looked different to the network that the Qunari had had a temporary control of. Different to Morrigan's too. The paths that wended through this realm was simple stone with runes carved upon them, glowing white yet turning iridescent once they were in his periphery. Lavellan could read the runes if he looked long enough. An ability granted by the Well.

Everything beyond the road was indistinct. Smudges of trees in the distance. The sky was a haze and anything beyond the road was grey.

“Stay close,” said Briala. “Always stay on the path. I don’t know how I’ll explain to your Inquisition that I lost their Inquisitor in a separate realm.”

He laughed. “My Ambassador would faint from stress.”

“I rest my case.” She glanced around and pressed her lips in displeasure. “The eluvian leading to the labyrinth that controls this network is closed.”

He wasn’t surprised. But still, what the hell was Solas doing?

Lavellan arranged the timeline in his head. So, once his conversation with Briala had ended, that was when they’d realised that the network had been blocked completely. Lavellan had spent most of that time afterwards talking and dancing with Solas and the only real window of time Solas would have had to reopen a few eluvians was...

After their dance.

After their conversation and talk of plans changing and principles and duty...

Did Solas change his mind? Something tentative curled in Lavellan’s chest. This felt as if Solas was saying, “I’ll give you a fighting chance,” instead of shutting it down entirely. Still a dick move, but not as much of a dick as he could have been.

“Come,” said Briala. “I want to check the closest open eluvian.”

Briala led him through the straightforward paths before arriving at an intersection. She took a left. Lavellan geared to follow but the Well of Sorrows’ whispers heightened, and a strange chill passed through him. He stopped.

Shadows shifted in the corners of his vision.

He turned his head.

Nothing there. Nothing but the grey paths and glowing runes and the impressions of trees in the distance.

Something brushed against his back. A ghost of a touch.

Lavellan jerked away, hands unsheathing his daggers in a flash. Vergala flew off his shoulders and perched on a nearby tree.

Smoke coasted along the path, poured forth from seemingly nowhere. He settled into a battle stance. Could this be a demon? A new kind of horror? Something of Solas’ creation?

The smoke coalesced, darkened, formed the flickering shape of a cloaked figure. Lavellan’s eyes widened. The smoke compacted further until the figure’s outlines grew defined, their cloak swaying from a non-existent breeze. Their cloak of raven feathers. No, but that—

That couldn’t be. This figure had only ever been in his dreams.

He lowered his daggers, wary. Their hood still cast an unnatural shadow over their face and obscured it.

“Why are you here?” Lavellan asked.

The raven-cloaked figure gave no answer, merely turned and walked the path straight ahead, the edges of their cloak dissipating into smoke. Lavellan stared at them, then at Briala, who'd continued on ahead, unaware that Lavellan wasn't following. He looked back at the raven-cloaked figure. They'd stopped. They were just... waiting there.

“Vergala, are you seeing this?” he asked.

She returned to his shoulders and cawed. “Follow.”

The raven-cloaked figure started walking, fading further into smoke as the distance between them and Lavellan grew. The last few times the figure had made an appearance, they'd led him to something related to his memories, so could it be the same situation now?

With a resigned sigh, Lavellan followed.

But no matter how fast he ran, they remained the same distance apart, the figure always on the verge of disappearing. He couldn't risk slowing, otherwise, he'd lose track of them. At least there was only one path, even if it curved here and there. It would be easy to backtrack.

A large eluvian soon came to view, its golden, ornate frame the only splash of colour in this greyscale land.

The cloaked figure was nowhere to be seen.

Lavellan stared at the dull surface of the eluvian, frowning. Why here? It wasn't as if he could step through.

A headache pulsed at the back of his head.

My fingers tingle in anticipation and I can't keep my aura from trembling as I descend into the gardens. Dirthamen is sitting by the fountain, its stream of water whispering secret songs.

“[Ma Venuralas](#)^[1],” I say, “I wish to show you something.”

Dirthamen looks up at me, his fingers swirling lazy patterns over the water.

“Calm,” Dirthamen reminds me and I take a moment to compose myself. My aura recedes. He smiles in approval. “What did you wish to show me?”

“We will need an eluvian for it.”

He rises and outstretches a hand. I go to his side and he rests that hand on my back.

“Come, let us walk through the garden,” he says. “We may use the eluvian here.”

We walk through the garden path, its white stones gleaming opalescent, every breath of wind swaying the bells of flowers draped over the crystal trees. Dirthamen strolls without urgency. Our slow pace chafes at me, but his solid hand on my back guides me to patience.

“The wisteria are beautiful,” says Dirthamen, reaching up and brushing his fingers

against them as we pass. "Is there a reason why you chose to plant them?"

"Their colour reminds me of your eyes."

He smiles. "You never did tell me what I did to earn your loyalty."

"I saw an artist," I say, "who could use a difficult medium."

Dirthamen watches me from the corner of his eyes but says nothing else.

We soon reach the eluvian, which flares with colour upon Dirthamen's approach. His hand falls off my back as I step forward.

"The Fade is an ever-changing realm," I say, and place my hand upon its surface.

"Change is a major force within the Fade, shaping the very nature of it. The eluvians borrow this malleable characteristic." I flex my fingers, colours rippling as I reach for the very essence of change within the eluvian's magic. "June has done a wonderful job of integrating it into the mirrors. It is skilful. But change is change, and it is still my domain."

A flood of light flares from my fingertips and douses the colours.

I pull my hand back and smile back at Dirthamen. His serene disposition wavers with the hints of surprise.

"You closed it," he whispers.

I touch the dull surface once more and colours burst from the point of contact.

"And now I have opened it," I say.

"Without a passphrase or keystone." His eyes glimmer with pride and he rests his hand upon my head. "You are pushing boundaries, my little raven."

"Boundaries exist to be pushed."

He laughs. "Perhaps, but you must take care. Entropy bites at your heels." He moves his hand to cradle my cheek, his touch gentle but his eyes steely. "There is strength in control. Know when to hold the leash tight... and when to slacken your grip. But never let it go."

I hold his gaze. "How tight do you hold my leash, ma Venuralas?"

Dirthamen smiles. "You have a hungry look in your eyes."

Devotion invaded his lungs, stained every exhale. Lavellan passed a hand over his face, shook off the curl of gratification from that distant, faded memory. He closed his eyes and took a moment to recompose himself. Vergala cawed in worry. He ignored the chill on his cheek — the remnant of Dirthamen's touch.

Lavellan eyed the faded eluvian and the runes hidden within the ornate patterns of its frame. From what he could read, this eluvian led to the labyrinth which had control of the entire network. If Briala could re-enter, she could wrest control away from Solas. Lavellan could open it for her.

He stared at his hand. Could he do it again? He had no idea how to use any of his spirit abilities, whatever they were.

Fuck it, it was worth a shot.

Lavellan reached for the eluvian, rested tentative fingers on its surface. He scrunched his face in focus and searched for the essence of change within the eluvian. Its magic was there. Faint. Pulsing. He sifted through the noise, searched the turbulent ocean of magic for the threads of change.

“Come on,” he hissed.

Something called, tugged. He grabbed a thread before it could slip through his awareness, something within him resonating with the eluvian.

Lavellan sucked in a breath, eyes widening.

He had it.

Now all he had left to do was pull—

[*Is jueolas*](#)^[2], the Well warned.

Lavellan froze.

Patience, echoed Dirthamen’s voice in his head, and Lavellan’s jaw clenched, but he still found himself heeding it.

What were the consequences of forcefully opening this? If the owner of the network could sense the eluvians and whether they were opened or closed, then forcefully opening this would alert Solas *and* Briala (since they had a strange, joint ownership of the network from what he could tell). Briala would catch him on his lie, Solas would investigate. Solas was already suspicious enough about him.

His shoulders slumped. Begrudgingly, he released his hold over the eluvian and stepped back.

Not today, it seemed, but the coil of excitement still pulsed within him.

“Let’s get back to Briala,” he said to Vergala. He made his way back, cast the eluvian a final glance over his shoulder.

He followed the path back to the intersection where he’d separated from Briala and took the path she’d taken. Wherever she was now. She’d told him not to wander and then he’d gone traipsing off on his merry way. At least something had come out of it, even if he couldn’t use the ability for now.

“You always ruin my fun,” Lavellan muttered at Solas.

“Inquisitor!” came Briala’s admonishing voice from behind him and he jumped. Lavellan turned in time for a whack to his arm. “I was looking for you everywhere. I told you not to wander!”

He rubbed his arm with a sheepish, grimacing smile. “Sorry.”

“Do I need to pinch and drag you by the ear?”

“I promise to stay close,” he swore, and put a hand to his heart.

Briala sighed. "Walk in front so I can keep an eye on you."

"No trust! I'm so offended."

"You'll live."

Lavellan behaved and stayed with Briala the entire time. It helped that no raven-cloaked figures made a reappearance. They soon reached one of the remaining active eluvians, its surface bursting with colour.

"Where's this one lead?" he asked.

"Most of our supplies," she said.

Vergala straightened to her full height, scanning the surroundings. Her crest rose. Before Lavellan could ask, she took off and circled the skies. He frowned up at her.

"Is your bird alright?" asked Briala.

"She saw something," he said. "She only does that when there's trouble nearby."

Briala reached for her bow but Lavellan held up a hand and signalled for her to wait. Vergala cawed twice, circling one of the short, scraggy trees beside the path. Lavellan's gaze fell on it.

And by the base of it, so small that he almost missed it, was a mouse.

"He's started getting an interest in mice," Samara said and sighed. "Of all the animals..."

Because he must have seen his mother shapeshifting into one.

Vergala dove from the skies and swooped at Samara, cawing incessantly. Samara ran. Shit, she'd report back to Solas! How much had she heard and seen?

"Vergala, after it!" he called and she gave chase. Lavellan ran after them and Briala had no choice but to follow, bewildered.

In the end, they lost her. Samara had been too fast and she'd blended in perfectly with the greyscale realm.

"Shit," he hissed and mussed his hair.

Vergala returned to his shoulders, head bowed. "Sorry. Slow."

His heart broke at her dejection. "There's nothing to apologise for. You still saw her."

"Too late."

He scratched the underside of her beak. "Chin up, love. You did what you could."

Briala crossed her arms once she caught up to them. "Do you have a personal vendetta against rodents?" she asked.

"That was a shapeshifter." He rubbed his face. Not tampering with the eluvian had been a good call. He thanked the Well of Sorrows. Their whispers surged and retreated in response.

"Ah, telling the truth now, are you?"

Lavellan stilled. He closed his eyes and let out a slow breath.

He looked at her and smiled dryly. "I got sloppy, huh?"

"A little," she said. "Even the most proficient players of the Game slip when they're exhausted or something catches them off-guard. Which is it, Inquisitor?"

"Both," he sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Let's get back. You likely have questions."

"That, I do."

They returned to the Winter Palace, Lavellan's stomach twisting the entire time. Upon return, he gave the borrowed daggers back and waited for Briala to relay the situation and delegate tasks to the others, the atmosphere fraught with uncertainty. Once they were alone, she jerked her head. He followed her through more irritating corridors, bypassed a barred door, and entered another area under renovations.

"This way," she said and opened a door into a humble bedroom with a table set up in front of an already roaring fireplace.

"Vergala, check," he said and she flew out the open windows, scanning the area before she flew back into the room.

"Clear," she said.

"Keep an eye out."

She cawed and flew out the window once more. Briala eyed him the entire time.

"We should be free to talk now," he said.

She rummaged through a drawer and pulled out an ornate silver box.

"I refuse to begin this conversation without food," she said and set it on the table, fell more than sat on the seat. She gestured for him to take a seat across her and opened the lid. Lavellan gasped as he sat. The box contained the small, round biscuits from earlier! Briala raised a brow. "Would you like some?"

He fidgeted. "It's your food. You go ahead."

She snorted and pushed the box towards him. "Go on. They're called macarons. It's relatively new. First created in Antiva, apparently, and our bakers had the idea of adding filling."

Lavellan gratefully took one and couldn't quite hide his beam.

"You are very strange," she said with an amused smile. "Terribly ominous with your black uniform and talking raven and yet you smile like a child during their first Satinalia when you eat macarons."

"I've never had these before. These are life-changing," he said and savoured it. He would have died without having ever eaten them. That was the true travesty. This was the real reason why he'd been brought back in time. So he could eat macarons. That was what he'd been put here on this world to do.

He itched for another but refrained.

Briala pushed it further towards him. "Eat as much as you want. Do take care. It gets sweet after a few."

Lavellan's hesitation lasted a grand total of three seconds before he took another and happily bit into it. It almost made him forget about his apprehension.

After eating in silence for a handful of moments, Briala leaned back and clasped her hands over the table.

"Alright, talk," she said. "How do you really know about the eluvians?"

"First tell me what gave it away."

"Not a single shred of awe when we entered the eluvian," she said and smiled. "You looked rather used to it for someone who's only heard the theory of it."

"I walked through the Fade physically. You ever think that I'm just used to strange things in general?"

"Not this," she said. "Not when it's a fragment of our history." Her eyes softened. "Not when it feels like home."

Lavellan stared at the fire.

"I wasn't completely certain when I called you out," she said, "but like you said, you were exhausted. It's harder to continue lying."

"Fine," he said. "I've used the eluvians before and that's about as much as I'm willing to divulge on that matter."

She studied him. "The eluvians being taken from me wouldn't happen to have something to do with the wolf haunting your dreams, would it?"

Lavellan's gaze flicked towards her. The fireplace crackled, sputtered out a cloud of embers.

"No wonder Felassan was fond of you," he mused. "How... was he? When you last saw him?"

She frowned. "You're stalling."

"A little," he admitted, "but really, how was he?" A hint of melancholy spilled into his tone and Briala must have sensed it because she relented.

"He helped me during the Halamshiral rebellion," she said, her demeanour softening. "Always arriving when I needed him most. I was so blindly loyal to Celene but he encouraged me to question, helped me see I had merit of my own. I owe him many things." She laughed. "But he was still an idiot half the time. He chewed on bark."

Lavellan raised a brow. "Bark."

"He said certain barks were used by the Dalish as a remedy for headaches."

He buried his head in his hands and groaned. "When dried and boiled with water to make tea!"

Briala laughed.

"Glad to know he was doing well," he said.

Before Solas had killed him anyway.

Why? Why would he— Felassan was one of his most loyal. All because he'd failed to get the passphrase?

"I owe the eluvians to him too," said Briala after her laughter abated. There was still a faint smile on her lips. "We were at the labyrinth. Celene and Gaspard were busy bickering, while I assumed control of the eluvian network for myself. Are you familiar with one of Fen'Harel's tales? The one of Anaris and Andruil?"

"He goaded them into fighting one another while he chewed through his ropes."

She nodded. "Felassan told me of it. I saw the situation was similar. Gaspard or Celene, either one would see our people suffer unless I took matters into my own hands."

"Is he in the habit of telling you a lot of tales about Fen'Harel?"

"Often. He *did* name himself after one of Fen'Harel's tales." She frowned. "From my understanding, the Dalish do not tell tales of him in such a flattering manner. They are usually focused on his deceitful nature, not his guile."

"No," he agreed and leaned forward, leaning his elbows on the table. "Did you tell Felassan the pass?"

"He didn't let me tell him."

Lavellan's heart twisted. Felassan hadn't failed, then. He'd actively chosen to abandon his task. Loyal Felassan who'd changed his name for Solas had chosen to place his faith in Briala in the end.

Briala played with the lid of the macaron box, twisting the knob between her fingers. "This wolf in your dreams, Inquisitor... It wouldn't happen to be the Dread kind, would it?"

Lavellan popped a whole macaron into his mouth.

He reached for another when he finished chewing. Briala pulled the box away from him.

"Yes, fine," he said. "It's the Dread kind."

Her brows raised. "Did you anger him?"

"I— Probably."

"What did you do?"

"I yelled at him. A lot."

"You yelled," she said, "at a god."

"God," he scoffed. "He's an idiot is what he is."

Briala watched him with too-astute eyes. Felassan's student. Lavellan was certain she'd become even more impressive than Felassan had expected.

"What is your connection to Fen'Harel?" she asked.

"I angered him."

“If you truly angered him, I don’t think he would go through the trouble of haunting your dreams and spending more time in your presence.”

“Who says it’s actually him visiting my dreams? He could be giving me nightmares about him instead.”

She hummed, completely ignoring him. “Lovers then.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“All this evasion is working against you, Inquisitor.” She tilted her head. “Perhaps you’re not lovers, but you hold some fondness for him.”

“It’s complicated,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

“Uncomplicate it. We have time.”

“He’s...” He made a face, searched for a suitable word. Ex-lover? Lover? Fuck, what were they?
“He’s a close friend.”

“Celene was my *close friend*, Inquisitor, did you know?”

“I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not.” She pushed the macaron box towards him again. Lavellan’s hand moved before he could halt it and he was left nibbling irritably on a macaron as Briala smiled at him. “What does he want with the eluvians?”

Lavellan eyed her. Should he follow Felassan’s lead and withhold the truth? Or would that keep Briala in the dark, and therefore vulnerable? If she knew and began actively or subtly trying to work around Solas, he and his agents might realise, and it could all point back to Lavellan. But then, even though Solas had given Briala three eluvians, he still had control of the network and could retract this access at any time. If Lavellan withheld the truth, she could be in trouble. He wanted to believe that Solas would never hurt her or Orlais’ elves but...

He'd believed that Solas would never use the Well of Sorrows against him.

There was no guarantee.

Lavellan propped his elbows up on the table and rested his forehead on his interlocked fingers.

After a measure of silence, he raised his head and asked, “What do you know about the fall of Elvhenan?”

Samara scurried through the palace corridors, stuck to crevices and spaces away from sight, ducked from the eyes of nobility and servants alike.

That had been a close call. Her heart was still racing from her encounter with the Inquisitor and his raven. The cutting focus of his eyes had struck a small swell of fear within her, far too used to his kinder gazes.

She swerved out an open balcony window, stuck to the ledges and worked her way around the palace's cornices, crawled up a pipe and swung herself into the open window of her destination. The fireplace blazed, warm, orange firelight awash in the gaudy Orlesian room. She shifted back into her elven form, already on one knee with her head bowed.

"You are early."

"My apologies," she said. "I had not counted on Inquisitor Lavellan entering the eluvian with Briala."

His back was to her as he stood watching the flames. His right hand was holding something, but the shadows from the fire were obscuring the item.

"He was with Briala?" he asked. "She revealed the eluvians to him?"

"No, he already knew about them. Of their existence, at least. He walked the paths as if he had walked them before. He separated from her at one point. I hope you will forgive me for deciding to follow him instead of the Ambassador."

"You made the right call," he said. "What did he do?"

She frowned. "He found the eluvian to the labyrinth. Beyond that, nothing else. He reunited with Briala and shortly after, his raven alerted him to my presence."

He quieted. Only the crackle and pops of the fire filled the silence.

His ensuing laughter startled her.

"So he knows of the eluvians," he said. "What else have you learned?"

"Not much else, unfortunately. I apologise." She observed his reaction. He never raised his voice, never became violent or angry even if he was displeased, but most of them would agree that they preferred raised voices and violent outbursts over the cutting and glacial silence that would befall the room if they fail him.

He hummed, rolled whatever it was he was holding in his hands. It sounded like wood.

"There is no need to apologise. You did what you could."

"Would you like to send someone to his quarters?" she asked. "We could observe—"

"No. Let him rest. Tonight has been long."

She suppressed a smile. Always like this, even in Skyhold. The Inquisitor's chambers were granted utmost privacy, though she suspected that not a lot of agents could sneak past his raven either way.

"What do you think of Inquisitor Lavellan?" he asked.

Her head rose in surprise at the question, though his gaze remained on the fire as if it danced the answers for him. She thought the question over.

Easy smiles and kind yet heavy eyes. He tried to remember names and faces even when there was no need to, and he knew her son's name, her wife's name, remembered the small details of their daily life. He was both an overwhelming yet a barely felt presence. Searing light or shadowy whisper — no in-between.

Dangerous.

Shelter.

She regarded the god before her, the glow of the fire outlining him in amber, and smiled at their similarities.

At her extended silence, he said, "There is no right or wrong answer. I am simply curious."

"Apologies, it was just somewhat unexpected. I'm not certain where to begin."

"How is he as a leader?"

"Competent," she said. "And attentive. Everything runs as it should and any complaints we present is heard and addressed. On an interpersonal level, he's..." Her eyes and voice softened. "He cares. He does his best to interact with those working for him and it hasn't gone unnoticed." She eyed the twin moons outside the window, high and distant in the sky. Was Ahmael sleeping alright? Hopefully Krista wasn't too worn out. He was difficult to put to sleep sometimes. She fiddled with her locket, already missing her family. It was fine. They would return to Skyhold tomorrow.

"Why did you join me?" he asked.

Her nervousness returned. Was this a test of allegiance? To determine where her loyalty lay if it came down between him and the Inquisitor?

Because Samara didn't know her answer.

To his current question though, she had one. "I want a world where my son can grow up without having to debase himself to please others just to survive." Her grip tightened around the locket. "I want us to live without fear, without constant vigilance. I... I want us to have a home."

"Do you truly believe I can deliver that?" he asked, soft.

"I do," she said. He came when nobody else did. Answered when nobody else would. Not an absent Maker. He could do it; he was powerful enough. "I don't want to be above anybody. I just want to stop being beneath."

"Inquisitor Lavellan wishes to give the Dales and Arlathan back to the elves."

Her head snapped up at that.

"He has been somewhat successful tonight. He has given Briala the title of Marquise."

"Briala is an impressive woman," she admitted, "but too embroiled in Orlais' Game. I cannot be sure of her intentions, though she has done some good for those in the alienages."

But Arlathan?

"His promise is a grand one," he said.

"Not quite as grand as yours," she said. The complete restoration of the elves.

He chuckled. "No, but what you wish aligns more with his vision."

"Which is?"

“A home. A place to call yours.”

Her breath hitched, caught in her throat.

“Compared to mine, it seems almost humble,” he said.

“But could he do it?” she asked, eyes downcast, heart aching. Unlike some of the others who wished to see the elves above, to once again be at the seat of power, all she wanted was a peaceful life. Where who and all they were wouldn’t narrow down to the shape of their ears. “Furthermore, will you let him do it?”

His grip tightened around the items in his hand.

“I cannot fail,” he said and his head bowed. “And I do not doubt his ability. He will find a way, somehow, but time is not on his side. Neither is it on mine.” That last part he mumbled to himself, but she managed to catch and make sense of it. Samara frowned.

“Is everything alright?” she found herself asking. Wait, shit, was she allowed to ask that?

He paused and she tensed. Did she overstep?

But he only shook his head and gave her a small smile over his shoulder.

“You have a good heart,” he said and she blinked. “Your wish is humble and true. I suggest that if the time comes when you must choose who to give your allegiance to... I suggest you choose him.”

Samara stared at him, or maybe she gaped. Was she gaping? *Close your mouth, fool!*

“I— I’m sorry?” she asked.

“A mere suggestion. The choice is ultimately yours.”

“He could join you,” she blurted out. “You and him... Together you could be unstoppable.”

A soft, amused noise left him, laughing at a joke she wasn’t privy to. She pushed on because it turned out that there *was* a risk taker within her, who would have thought?

“If you tell him the truth, I think... If you make him understand...”

“I cannot enforce understanding, nor can I demand it. And I doubt he would welcome my truth.”

“Because he’s Dalish? You think he will distrust you?”

He was silent again. Maker, she should really get going before she offended him.

“No,” he said, though he sounded unconvinced. “Although...” And he was lost in his thoughts once again. He shook his head as if clearing his mind. “But I am keeping you. Go on. You have early duties tomorrow and I would not wish to deprive you of well-needed rest. Our dear Inquisitor does that enough for the Inquisition combined.”

A true enough sentiment. She laughed despite herself.

“Good evening, then,” she said. “I wish you a good rest.”

“Good evening.”

She shifted into a bird and flew out the window, but not before she looked back a final time and saw him staring at the items in his hands.

Wooden wolves.

“I need tea,” was Briala’s response after he told her the true story about Fen’Harel and his current plans (though he omitted the part about Felassan). She slumped in her seat.

“He let you keep some of the eluvians. Maybe he’s having a change of heart.”

“There’s no use hoping he would help us, is there?”

Lavellan had no answer for that. None that he’d be certain of, anyway.

“I offered,” he murmured. “It’s there if he wants to take it.”

“To help the elves?”

“To give us a home,” he said. “I told him I wanted to return the Dales and Arlathan to the elves. That I wanted us to have a home, a place we can call our own.” He leaned back in his seat, heavy, weary. “I’m pretty sure he thought I was as stupid as I thought him.”

“That *is* a large promise,” Briala returned, soft.

“I suppose you probably think me stupid too.”

She smiled, but it wasn’t mocking. “Maybe. But I am, too. Freedom is won, Inquisitor. Chains never break quietly. Let them mock and call us stupid. Maybe our dreams won’t be realised in our lifetime, but we’ve planted the seeds.”

And maybe, partly, that was why Solas had trouble letting it go. Besides the guilt and obligation to right his wrongs, he couldn’t trust the future, and Lavellan couldn’t fault him for that. He was scared too. Scared that his vision for the elves would die with them. Lavellan only hoped Solas hadn’t given them a chance out of some misguided form of pity because if so, Lavellan would yell at him until he went deaf.

“There’s still the issue of our people’s safety,” said Briala. His heart still gave a little excited kick every time she said *our*. “Fen’Harel may have allowed us access to some eluvians, but the network is still his. We could be in danger.”

Lavellan shook his head. “He’s preoccupied with Corypheus at the moment.”

He would like to believe that Solas wouldn’t hurt them, but he was capable of ruthlessness when pushed, not out of malice or spite, but out of a misguided sense of duty. A man who sacrificed and sacrificed and sacrificed. He would chew off his limbs and cut off his tail without hesitation.

But the call for a sacrifice never ended. Once you’ve offered yourself wholly, what else was left to give besides what wasn’t yours?

“For now, tread carefully,” he said. “I’ll try to figure out what I can and let you know if you’re in danger or not.”

"I always tread carefully." She crossed her arms. "And you showed that he employs agents. It's possible that one of mine is also one of his and relayed the pass to him."

"Without a doubt," he said. "You know who you've told the pass to?"

"A handful. Though none of them know you've helped me connect this to Fen'Harel." She scowled. "But the spy from earlier saw you with me. Is he going to be happy about you running off to help me?"

"I've already declared my intentions and I don't care for his approval either way." Lavellan laughed nervously. "Although, he doesn't know I'm onto him and his plans. I need to be careful. I've gotten sloppy tonight."

She pushed the macaron box even further towards him. "Take the rest. They may be your last meal."

"Are you naturally this dreary?"

She smiled. "It's the court custom. Anticipate the worst and greet it with cake."

"Gods, I hate Orlesian court," he muttered. Took another anyway.

"That's your sixth," she observed.

"If you're going to judge me, do it quietly."

"I've already been doing that. I find it's not as fun as doing it aloud."

He huffed as he chewed. Still, she was right. He should have been more careful in the first place. For all that he relied on complacency to fell his enemies, he hadn't realised it had crept up on him too.

"But in all seriousness, Inquisitor," said Briala with a worried twist to her lips. "Are you in danger?"

"I'm in more danger from Corypheus than Fen'Harel right now," he said, propping his chin on his hand as he frowned at the flames. "But don't concern yourself with worrying about me. I can take care of myself."

"Well then, I'll throw that right back at you. Don't worry about us," she said and he blinked at her. "I have a handle on things here, we'll manage. Worry about yourself and your Inquisition for now. I'll make use of the time and power you've given me."

One hunt at a time. He nodded and smiled gratefully.

"I'll try," he said. "And before I forget, I saved one of yours in the Royal Wing. She says you sent her there to die because she knew the truth about you and Celene." Her hand clenched on the tabletop and he tilted his head. "Is that accusation true?"

She sighed. "Yes. I am doubted enough, Inquisitor, and my efforts continue being reduced as the result of a falling out with Celene. And now I was granted the title of Marquise. Some may say that is favouritism, and if Celene does claim that it was your idea, my efforts will be downplayed even further."

He stared at the dancing orange glow reflecting on the metal lid. "Rumours will always persist."

They will call you pet, lap dog, all sorts of things, and the best way to spite them is to succeed despite that. And if your efforts are downplayed, all the better. Let them underestimate you. So no more sending agents to die willy-nilly, yes? You've lost enough people tonight."

Perhaps the Inquisition could help set up proper funeral rites for the dead servants because Orlais sure as fuck wouldn't.

Briala yawned. She grumbled after and rubbed her eyes.

"Go rest, Briala," he said. "We'll leave these concerns for the morning. If you need to contact me privately without interference from any agents after we return to Skyhold, just send a letter and ask. I'll send a letter back using my raven. Only send letters through her if you want to guarantee complete privacy."

"I've been meaning to ask," she said. "I've worked with red-crests before. They are intelligent, but I've never seen something of that extent."

"I don't know either," he said. "But she can be trusted, that much I know."

"She could be a shapeshifter."

"Doubt it," he said. Lavellan knew she wasn't, but once more, he couldn't access the rest of the information. He stood. "In any case, we're both exhausted. It's time to retire for tonight. I know you still have a lot of questions and some of them I can't answer, but I'll try to keep in touch."

She stood as well and nodded. "I appreciate it. Thank you again, Inquisitor Lavellan."

Lavellan whistled for Vergala and she returned, perched herself on his shoulder. Briala walked him back to the Guest Quarters. They shared a resolute look, parted with a nod.

Once in the relative safety of his bedroom, he slumped against the door with a sigh and knocked his head back against it. This wasn't how he'd thought the night would end.

"Lavellan rest," said Vergala.

"For once, I agree."

His belongings had been returned to his room, so small mercies.

And so, Lavellan discarded his armour for tonight. He slipped the cuffs off his ears, removed the bloodstained uniform (there had to be a way to clean and salvage it), and ran a bath in the bathroom. Again, he kept it short to avoid certain memories.

By the time he was dried and wrapped in the Orlesian robes that had been set aside for him, Vergala had fallen asleep. He smiled at her and extinguished the candles.

He fell face-first on the bed and grunted. Orlesians and their gods-forsaken too-soft beds—

Lavellan rolled onto his back and stared at the canopy of the bed, missing his bedroom in Skyhold.

What the hell was Solas doing? Did their conversation on the balcony really...

He curled up on his side. Despite his better judgement, his heart still skipped, and hope dared to peer from behind the heavy curtains he'd draped over his heart. His mind returned to their dance. Lavellan still felt the phantom weight of Solas' hands on his hips, the warmth of him even through the layers of clothes.

“You never make it easy, do you?” he murmured, eyes sliding shut.

The Fade beckoned.

The Wolf waited.

Chapter End Notes

STOP! BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING ELSE! CHECK OUT [CHILDISH MIDGET'S ART](#), THEY DREW A VERY PAINFUL SCENE PLEASE LOOK AT IT I NEED SOMEONE TO CRY WITH.

And didn't you know? This isn't a solavellan fic anymore, it's lavellan x macarons. Sorry Solas.

But in all seriousness, *oof*, Lavellan almost got caught. Say thank you, Well of Sorrows.

(Poor Lavellan ended the night getting laid in the first timeline but all he gets now are problems.)

Solas and Lavellan: *opening their mouth to talk about each other*

Samara and Briala, sensing how smitten the man is within .5 seconds: ~why the fuck u lyin? Why u always lyin? mmmh my god, stop fuckin lyin~

(Psst, wanna see how the final confrontation with Solas went in the past timeline? --> [Prima Luce](#))

Translation

[1] **Ma Venuralas:** My Deity^[1]

[2] **Is jueolas:** He will know^[1]

Poison in power's chalice

Chapter Notes

Another chapter that's mostly dream sequence and only has solas and lavellan? In MY fanfic? It's more likely than you think.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

the truth on your palms—

Ballroom music drifted in the air, a string of notes enticing him through the Winter Palace's cold, opulent corridors. A blue door awaited at the end, the corridor twisting behind him as he passed, gold and marble melting. The music grew louder. It did not sound Orlesian.

Lavellan pushed the door open.

The ballroom before him was just as Orlesian as the music.

Spirits and elves alike meandered through the large chamber, dressed in silks and satins and robes with a myriad of colours — some shifting hues, others alive with ornate, moving patterns. He eyed the ceiling with its mural of sweeping patterns and vague landscapes. An orange spirit drifted past. Not an actual spirit but the echo of one.

Everything here was an echo.

Lavellan frowned and moved into the room, found a lower level dedicated for dancing. Elves spun and waltzed in perpetual motion to the gentle music, fabric spinning, fluttering, never catching around them. Lovers held each other close. Pressed themselves tight, whispered intimacies into each other's ears. Others plotted, eyes shifty. Decadence hung heavy and heady, the air saturated with sordid secrets and schemes, extravagance and excess evident in the architecture, the clothes, the mannerisms.

He navigated the upper floor, garbed in his military uniform. Nobody paid him any heed. Nobles were gathered in seating areas, scheming, tittering, gossiping. Tendrils of light and magic wove in the air.

A slave poured wine into a noble's cup, the ink of her vallaslin coloured; the mark of a slave owned by an Evanuris or one of the highest ranking of the priests and nobility.

Across the room was Fen'Harel, leaning against a column, his gaze following Lavellan.

Ass could have at least taken him somewhere nice. He'd had enough of court.

Glass crashed. Almost lost beneath the music, soft as if meant to be overlooked, but Lavellan looked. A slave was crouched and hurriedly gathering broken shards of glass while her mistress yelled, the other nobles around them shaking their heads. The noblewoman raised her hand. Lavellan moved without thinking, put himself between her and the slave, and caught her hand.

Or would have, anyway.

Her hand phased through him, connected with the slave girl's face, and the force of it flung her onto the floor.

"You stained my robes!" she shrieked. He glowered.

"It's a fucking droplet at the edge," he said, not that she'd hear. "You'll live."

He crouched in front of the servant, her hands frantic as she collected the broken shards of glass, didn't stop even as it tore into her skin. Lavellan couldn't even offer a hand to help.

"Get out of my sight," said the noblewoman and waved her away. The slave fled.

He stood and beheld the ballroom. It was beautiful, certainly. Magical. Fantastical. Perfection. Rotten.

Everywhere he looked, rotten.

He retreated to the sides, in the shadows, in the forgotten and unseen yet familiar corners. Lavellan made his way towards Fen'Harel and swiped the goblet Fen'Harel had been holding. He took a swig.

Nothing.

"Listen, ass, if you're going to dump me here, at least grant me the courtesy of giving me Fade alcohol."

Fen'Harel raised a brow but Lavellan couldn't look at him. Not yet. Not after...

"Do you not like it?" he asked. "Your fellow Dalish can only dream in fragments of experiencing this."

"If I wanted to drown in the poison of an empire, I have two sparkling choices in the waking world." He poured the fake wine out of the goblet and watched it dissolve into smoke. "Oh, wait! I'm already sleeping in one of them. Fancy that."

Lavellan sighed, weary, and finally looked at him. His face still eluded Lavellan. Still hiding. Memories of the ill-advised kiss returned and his chest clenched.

"What's this about?" Lavellan asked. "A taunt? A mockery? A smug declaration?"

Fen'Harel's gaze saddened. "Never," he murmured. "I respect you far too much for that."

"Oh yes, really felt the respect when you started with tongue," he said dryly.

He cleared his throat. "I... About that, I..." He looked away and closed his eyes. "I am sor—"

"Don't you fucking dare," hissed Lavellan through gritted teeth, his grip around the goblet tightening. "Don't you dare apologise. Don't treat me like another one of your regrets, your mistakes. I was no helpless thing. I kissed you back. Don't you *dare*."

Fen'Harel stared at him, wide-eyed. "You— If I overstepped—"

"If you overstepped, I would have punched you so hard that the dream would have spat us both back into the waking world. I am capable of voicing my aversion." He relaxed his grip on the goblet and stared at the bottom of it, unable to hold onto his irritation for long. Too exhausted. It

was not a topic he wanted to pursue either. The best course of action would be to talk about this, of course, but let Lavellan run away for a little longer. “If not a taunt, what’s this then?”

Fen’Harel considered him, but he must have sensed Lavellan’s unwillingness to pursue that conversation because he looked back out at the sea of nobles.

“A trial,” he said.

Lavellan snorted. “Oh? Did I pass?”

“It is not that kind of trial.”

He eyed Fen’Harel, garbed in his armour which seemed more ceremonial than practical. It fit him; he carried it well. Yet he looked so uncomfortable. Like balancing a crown atop your head. Like Lavellan sitting on his throne for judgements.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Lavellan and Fen’Harel frowned at him.

“Do what?”

He nodded at Fen’Harel’s attire. “That. There’s no need to keep up appearances. Go change into something more comfortable.”

Fen’Harel smiled, eyes squinting as he did. “I could be more comfortable wearing nothing.”

“I promise to keep my gaze above the shoulders,” he scoffed.

“More chivalry in your smallest finger than all Chevaliers combined.”

“That’s not very hard to do. A nug’s smallest nail has more chivalry than all Chevaliers combined.”

“Do nug’s have nails?” he wondered.

Lavellan frowned in befuddlement. “I’m... not sure? How did we get onto this topic?”

“It was your doing.”

“Shut up and get changed.”

Fen’Harel huffed, looked torn between being amused or offended, and so, he was stuck in the middle with an uncertain frown and a half-smile. Still, wisps of magic orbited him, and his clothes shifted into humbler robes. Less ornate and nigh simple save for the embroidery embellishing the edges. A wolf’s pelt cloaked his shoulders. He relaxed imperceptibly.

“Would you like to dress in something more comfortable too?” he asked Lavellan.

Lavellan glanced down at himself, comfortable enough in his attire but...

“Just give me my daggers and I’m golden.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Yes.”

He laughed, but nevertheless, Lavellan’s daggers materialised on his hips and their familiar weight removed some of his unease. Better.

Cheers from the dance floor caught his ears and he turned his head, frowning at the scene before him, gaze following the servants scurrying in the shadows, unseen, unheard. A few watched the nobles with a burning in their eyes — familiar.

“You told me I could come to you for anything,” I say.

Dirthamen smiles. “And I meant it.”

“Then I have a request.”

“This is a rare occasion. You rarely ask for anything.” He closes his book and it flies back to its shelf. He clasps his hands over the desk. “What is it?”

“I wish to have a small and specialised team.”

Dirthamen stares. “To lead?”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“While I am still fully capable of handling the missions you assign, it would be more efficient to have others who can undertake another mission concurrently.”

“I suppose I can choose a few of my agents.”

“With all due respect, ma Venuralas, I would not trust them to handle the missions you give me. Tasks you assign require a certain kind of precision that your agents have not cultivated.”

He raises a brow. “My dear raven, are you boasting?”

“I am stating a fact,” I say. “I’ve no use for boasting. I am your best and you know this. Why else would you let me handle such important tasks?” It has become a subject of jealousy among the others too, which is another reason why I’m not willing to work with those who may have hidden agendas. No, I require a team free of power plays. “I wish to assemble a group of people that I have personally handpicked and trained. There will be no vying for positions, no vying for power. They will serve with unquestionable loyalty.”

“To whom?” he asks, eyes gleaming. “You or me?”

“Both.”

“And who will fill the ranks of this... specialised team?”

“Leave that to me.”

“You are asking me to put a lot of faith in you.”

I blink, tilting my head. “Ma Venuralas, you have already placed your faith in me. I am merely calling on it.”

He laughs and rests his chin over interlocked fingers, a challenge shimmering in his

violet eyes.

“Prove it is not misplaced.”

I bow my head. “[Vin, ma Venuralas](#) ^[1].”

They look upon me, eyes swimming with a mixture of despair, anguish, subjugation, vengeance. Good. Let the fire within serve as the furnace and the smelter and I will give them the whetstone with which to polish and sharpen their blades.

Outstretch my hand. Give them purpose. Be more. Be unseen, unheard, and watch their marks wither. Spy, kill, watch, collect.

They take my hand.

I will build us from the shadows and I will give them wings.

The [El’ras’amelan](#) ^[2].

“Slaves,” says Dirthamen, smiling as he regards the first members of the El’amelan training in the courtyard below. “Some are even from other courts.”

“They are yours now,” I say.

He turns to me, smile widening. “You are the one who has raised them. No, they are yours.”

“They are not,” I say again. “They are with me. I do not hold their threads; we share the same. I will make us your strongest thread, and we will tangle ourselves within the empire.” My zeal unfurls within my chest, aglow in my heart. I kneel and take his hand, placing a kiss upon the ring on his finger.

Dirthamen turns the hand I am holding and tips my chin up. Still smiling. Always smiling at me. “Kneel like this for no one else.”

I smile back, but wry. “Not even your mother?”

“You are not hers. Fly away from the rest, peck their fingers if you wish, but know which hand to return to, my little raven.”

“What are you thinking about?” asked Fen’Harel. Lavellan returned to the present, brought everything back to clarity.

“The past,” said Lavellan, lightheaded. Not a lie, technically. He once again shook off the devotion and pushed it away into the darkest corners of his mind. Not that it would stay there for long.

So the El’ras’amelan had comprised of slaves he'd handpicked and... saved. Was that saving? Would that count as saving? From one chain to another.

“Where do you go?”

Lavellan blinked at him. “What?”

“When you fall into sudden quiet, your eyes grow distant as if you are not here. Where do you go?”

“I don’t go anywhere,” said Lavellan with a frown.

Fen’Harel watched him in the same manner Solas had earlier. Puzzled over a puzzle that was not a puzzle in the first place.

No, that wasn’t quite true anymore, was it? Lavellan had become a puzzle to himself too, and here he was painstakingly gathering the scattered pieces of himself.

“So then,” asked Lavellan because he had no wish to dwell on that, “what test is this?”

He scrutinised Lavellan for a second longer, before he transferred that scrutiny to their setting. A different song started. The dance changed. Lavellan regarded the light fixtures with their golden arms twisted into elaborate and delicate patterns, luminous glass vines suspended along their winding length, scattering the gentle yet vivid illumination.

“It merely allows me a glimpse into the person,” said Fen’Harel. “Often, it reveals their priorities. What they first notice, what initial action they take, what they seek, how they behave — it all plays a part.”

“And what has this revealed?”

“Nothing I do not already know.” He eyed Lavellan, piercing. “Though I do wonder about the things I do *not* know.”

Lavellan held his gaze, level. So he was to be interrogated in his dreams as well? What an annoying wolf.

“Fascinating. Me too,” said Lavellan. “Were the eluvians your doing?”

His lips twitched. “Oh? I had not expected you to be so straightforward.”

Would it kill him to just say yes?

“Why leave three?” Lavellan asked.

“You won’t ask about why I took them in the first place?”

Asshole answering questions with questions—

“It sounds to me like you want to tell me but you’re trying to look nonchalant and unbothered by it, so you’re waiting for me to ask.” He rubbed his eyes. “Look, I’m a little tired of secrets for tonight. I’ve had my fill.” He’d had his fill since day one. “I’m begging you for truth at this stage.”

Fen’Harel said nothing. Lavellan looked away.

A trio of nobles walked past, tittering delicately, the ribbons of their gowns and robes trailing behind along with the scent of their perfume. The fabric phased through his arm and he jumped as it did. Who was the ghost here? Them or the echoes?

“I want to see if I can be proven wrong,” Fen’Harel answered.

Lavellan glanced at Fen’Harel, eyes wide, but it was his turn to look away.

“What?” Lavellan asked, faint.

Fen’Harel pushed off the column and turned. “Walk with me,” he said.

Lavellan cast the ballroom a final look, then walked beside him, frowning. With a wave of Fen’Harel’s hand, a door manifested in the wall ahead. He opened it and gestured Lavellan inside.

The sudden burst of sunlight had him squinting and he shielded his eyes with his arm.

Once the light became more forgiving, Lavellan lowered his arms and found himself in a sprawling, well-tended garden on a floating isle. He looked behind him but found only Fen’Harel, the door they’d walked through gone. The sunlight veiled them with buoyant warmth, the air crisp and shimmering with lost, untapped magic, and Lavellan breathed easier away from the asphyxiating curtain of the ballroom and court.

“Is this another test?” asked Lavellan.

Fen’Harel brushed his fingers against the flowers from a low-hanging tree. Above them, iridescence had sheened the clouds.

“No,” said Fen’Harel. “You seemed miserable in the ballroom. I would be remiss to keep you in a place which makes you unhappy.” His gaze softened as it swept across the isle and its vivid carpet of grass and cheery flowers, the trees chiming with every breath of wind, the crystal bridges connecting the isle to the others. A valley stretched below them. “And I suspect you would appreciate this far better than the opulence.”

“How... nice of you,” said Lavellan, frowning.

The corner of his lips curled. “Am I not always nice?”

Lavellan frowned deeper in lieu of an answer.

“You suspect a hidden agenda?” Fen’Harel asked.

“Would I be correct?”

He looked away. “Come, let us walk.”

Lavellan willed his shoes off, and so, here he was, strolling barefoot across a floating garden with the Dread Wolf. The silence was companionable but wrought with apprehension on Lavellan’s end.

What had Fen’Harel meant? He wanted to see if he could be proven wrong?

The traitorous lump of hope which had taken root in Lavellan’s heart like a weed refused to wither.

“You’re stalling,” said Lavellan.

“Oh?” asked the Dread Wolf breezily. The grass was cool as it pressed underfoot. “Am I not allowed to enjoy your company without any ulterior motives?”

“You’re allowed,” he said, “except, that’s not really what’s happening right now, is it?”

Lavellan stopped walking. Fen’Harel walked a few more paces before he stopped and clasped his hands behind his back. The wind whipped at Lavellan’s hair. Fen’Harel turned to look at Lavellan over his shoulders, eyes the colour of crystal grace.

It was a little strange meeting in the daylight like this. Lavellan had grown accustomed to their moonlit encounters.

Fen'Harel looked away again, beholding the valley below them, and all Lavellan could do was stare at his back.

"May I tell you a story?" Fen'Harel asked.

"Truth or fiction?"

"Does it matter, at this point?" he murmured, more to himself than Lavellan.

"It matters to me."

Fen'Harel turned to face him fully with a considering expression. "It is a story you will wish was fiction. What do you know of the Evanuris?"

"That they were locked away by Fen'Harel." Lavellan held his gaze. "That the rest of them murdered Mythal."

His eyes saddened. "Yes. And how do you connect those two events?"

Though Lavellan knew, he still played along. "Either you locked them away for murdering Mythal, you played a part in her murder and later betrayed the rest of the Evanuris, you didn't lock them away, or those two are not connected."

Fen'Harel's smile didn't reach his eyes. "And which do you believe?"

"I believe I'd rather hear the truth from you instead of conjecturing."

"Do you believe I would tell you the truth?"

"I doubt you'd go through all of this trouble and keep stalling this much just to lie to me." Lavellan studied the rose bush nearby and approached it, ghosted his fingers over the stem and the cruel thorns. "If I must, I'll read between the lines." He looked at Fen'Harel. "But I get the feeling we're both a little tired of lying tonight."

Fen'Harel looked away and watched the passing clouds. A stretch of silence passed. Lavellan brushed his fingers against the rose petals, their red so deep that he feared his fingers would stain.

"A Mother once sought counsel from a spirit in the Fade," began Fen'Harel, "for she faced difficult decisions as she cared for her many children. The spirit was only happy to provide. After all, that was its purpose; to accrue and deliver wisdom and knowledge to those who sought it. For many years, it had advised her."

"A Wisdom spirit," Lavellan deduced.

"Yes," said Fen'Harel. "But the problems with her children grew and she already had much to attend to. And so, she called for the spirit to take form so that it may both counsel her or take matters into its own hands if she could not. Wisdom had its reservations, but inevitably, it had grown to love her in a way only a spirit could." He smiled hollowly. "With utter and unconditional abandon."

"*He first loved without reserve,*" Lavellan had told him in the baths.

"Love borne of devotion," Lavellan murmured, the taste of said devotion stale at the back of his

throat.

Fen'Harel frowned at him. "Indeed," he agreed. "It took form. A difficult feat without a pre-prepared vessel, but the zeal of its dedication became its tether. *It became he.*"

"Without a pre-prepared vessel?" he asked.

"Bringing a spirit into physicality is a dangerous endeavour for the spirit. It could shatter or it could twist. If a spirit wishes to take form, a vessel must be prepared for it. The elves would create bodies from the earth, bound by magic, sometimes blood. When the spirit inhabits it, the vessel becomes flesh and bone. There are many other methods for a spirit to gain physicality, though I suspect that will be a talk for another time."

"Sorry, I side-tracked you." How had he manifested for Dirthamen? Had a vessel been prepared for him or had it been through the other methods that Fen'Harel had mentioned?

Pain, pain, this is agony. But hold on. Hold on. He's on this end.

Lavellan suspected he'd manifested in the same manner as Wisdom.

"Never apologise for curiosity, vun'lin." Fen'Harel smiled and it reached his eyes, this time. "I admire that about you."

Lavellan stared at him over the rose bush.

Fen'Harel continued. "Wisdom had to acquaint himself with the world first. Spirits then could not bear to manifest as anything older than a child. They must begin the arduous task of learning how to be physical, to care for the needs of their new bodies, to interact with the world so vastly different from the Fade." Another breeze swept past and the leaves of the rose bush brushed against his wrists. "She sent him away to a small town north where he grew and learned. Prodigious at magic and combat. He had grown cocky in that time." His smile turned amused. "So sure of the world. When she returned for him, she bid him to travel the land for a few decades and return to her."

"Did he choose a name?" Lavellan asked.

Fen'Harel pursed his lips. "Eventually," he said.

Lavellan fixed him with an intent look. "What was it?"

"A reminder and a warning," was all Fen'Harel said on the matter. Solas. Pride. "He returned with the knowledge he had amassed from the Fade and his travels, expecting to become advisor to her once more." His expression turned embittered. "Alas, it was not wisdom he would give, but orders. She branded him as hers and assigned him to lead and command their defensive forces. In his wisdom, he knew that all that would net was resentment among the soldiers, so he proposed to enlist as the others would and ascend the ranks on his own merit. She at least heeded the request."

"Never contest a god," teases Dirthamen.

"I was not."

"You have 'I disagree' written all over your face." He smiles. "Come now, what ails you?"

I cross my arms and my fingers dig into them. "He is Wisdom."

"Yes?"

It's not right for her to assign him to a task so diametric to his nature, but I hold my tongue. "Nothing. Apologies. It's... an unorthodox choice, is all."

Dirthamen eyes me though his look isn't one of displeasure. "Indeed. Who knows the ways of Mother's mind? But if I have learned anything, it's that her outlandish choices tend to work out in the end."

But at what cost? I almost ask but again, I hold my tongue.

"He served faithfully and devotedly over the centuries," said Fen'Harel, "and he climbed the ranks and earned his soldiers' loyalty. But the taller the golden spires of their kingdom grew, the deeper the hidden trenches of corruption carved. Wisdom tired of serving a system which perpetuated the atrocities committed against those he'd sworn to defend."

They stopped at a weeping willow perched near the edge of the isle, and Fen'Harel parted the curtain of leaves for Lavellan.

"I'm impressed he lasted that long," Lavellan said, couldn't keep his irritation out of it.

"Oh? Why is that?"

Lavellan perched on a low-hanging branch, swinging his legs as he stared down at Fen'Harel. Well, when he said stared down, it was nothing significant. Fen'Harel was tall.

Did Solas get disoriented after he diminished his height to better fit in? What had he been like the first time he'd done it? Lavellan suppressed a smile at the mental image of Solas straining to reach something he would have had no trouble retrieving before.

"It must have been draining," explained Lavellan. "And difficult. For much of his life, he was doing what he loved, which was amassing experience and wisdom. Then, he was suddenly forced to do something that disagreed with his nature. What's worse, he was branded as—" His lips twisted and he turned away. "Branded as her slave when he'd been made to believe that they would remain equals."

It was quiet once again. Lavellan stole a glance at Fen'Harel, who was looking at him with an unreadable glimmer in his eyes.

"You are right," said Fen'Harel. "The centuries took their toll, until one day, he had had enough. He broke his sword and threw the pieces at the All-Father's feet in impetuous outrage. The All-Father burned the soldiers still loyal to Wisdom as punishment." The glimmer in his eyes hardened. "In Wisdom's fury, he searched for a way to burn the mark of devotion off his face. And succeeded."

"Is it difficult to remove the vallaslin?"

“You misunderstand. They were not merely ink upon skin. They are marks imbued with lyrium. A master could send a surge of magic through the vallaslin to incapacitate their slave. It is a way of controlling them. Removing it took a certain precision, and it did not come without pain.”

A chill shot through Lavellan. He hugged himself.

“After freeing himself, Wisdom upset those in power through small acts of rebellion to humiliate them.” He smiled wryly. “Not unlike your friend. Rather, Friend. Uppercase.”

“The Friends of Red Jenny?”

“Something similar,” he said. “Soon, there were those who wished to join him. The Evanuris mockingly declared him a god of tricks and treachery to discourage it, so that the People would fear him instead.” His smile grew and he stepped closer, his head level with Lavellan’s navel. “And in dark corners,” he murmured, imparting his little secret, “they would whisper, *Fen’Harel*, in both ridicule and fear.”

Another breeze rustled the leaves.

“You made it yours,” Lavellan said.

Fen’Harel cradled Lavellan’s cheek, ran his thumb over the silver ear cuff. “You understand.”

Lavellan held himself still, otherwise, he would lean into the touch. “And you became a sanctuary.”

He withdrew his hand and Lavellan ignored the cold vacuum it left behind.

“I did not set out to be one, nor did I have a plan. I rejected worship and reviled offerings. Although, being declared an Evanuris had placed me in a unique position. I could answer simple prayers from the People that the other Evanuris would not otherwise deign to acknowledge.”

Was that why Tarasyl'an had been so... cold? Fen’Harel had actively discouraged worshippers that way.

“So *are* you an Evanuris?” asked Lavellan.

“No more than you are the Herald of Andraste,” he replied.

Lavellan’s eyes saddened, understood too well. “Then I’m sorry.”

Fen’Harel stared at him, searched his eyes, and bowed his head slightly. “As am I.”

Was he sorry about his unwilling apotheosis or sorry about Lavellan’s elevation to divine prophet because of his actions? Or something else? Knowing Solas, it could be all of the above and more.

“Many came to me to be freed from their vallaslin,” Fen'Harel continued. "Word spread. More and more turned to me for protection, for liberation, and little by little, my tricks became opposition. But my actions were no more than an irritant. I was but a mere nuisance to the Evanuris and their conquest for power. On my own, I was not enough.”

“You had help,” Lavellan deduced.

“The false gods had to be stopped,” said Fen’Harel. “Dirthamen and Mythal offered their assistance.”

Lavellan almost fell off the branch. His heart pounded, mouth drying, struggled to keep his breathing even. Dirthamen had helped Fen'Harel? Was that why Lavellan had helped Fen'Harel?

No.

No?

No, it wasn't. Lavellan frowned. What part had he played in that rebellion?

Furthermore— "Why would Mythal help you? You burned her mark off your face."

Fen'Harel smiled. "And who do you think urged me to?"

That was the opposite of comforting, but he held his tongue. Again.

Fen'Harel's smile faded. "However, Dirthamen betrayed us."

Lavellan did slip from the branch that time and Fen'Harel caught and lowered him gently onto the ground.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

He waved Fen'Harel off. "I'm fine. Dirthamen betrayed you? What do you mean he betrayed you?"

His expression turned stormy. "He revealed our plans to the rest of the Evanuris and they plotted in secret. By the time I found out, it was far too late." He hung his head. "They have killed Mythal."

Why would Dirthamen— Where had Lavellan been during this? What had he— The thoughts clamoured for attention but he couldn't pick which to listen to because none of them could finish, as if they were hitting a wall he couldn't breach.

"I banished the false gods to the furthest reaches of the Fade and I created the Veil," said Fen'Harel, voice now soft. "I thought it would save the People from them and their pointless war. With Mythal gone..." He laughed self-deprecatingly. "The Veil may have had the desired effect of banishing them, but it destroyed the elves. We, who had been so intrinsically tied to the Fade... Gone. Creating the Veil took much of my strength and I fell into a long sleep. When I awoke..."

Patches of sunlight slipped through the willow leaves and fell across them in bursts. Fen'Harel looked at Lavellan then, weary, heavy, despairing and lost.

"Everything was gone," he said. "I have destroyed my people."

Lavellan's hands fisted. "That's not true," he said. "We're still here. We still endure."

He feared it coming, and no matter how he thought himself ready, it still struck him when Fen'Harel gave him *that* look. A mixture of pity and doubt.

"The elves are no longer as they were," said Fen'Harel, morose. "They do not know and cannot comprehend what they have lost. *You* do not comprehend what you have lost."

A disbelieving and gutted exhale escaped him, turning into a single bark of laughter last minute. He knew *exactly* what they'd lost. "You—"

"But I plan to amend my mistakes," continued Fen'Harel.

“How? Something stupid like undoing the Veil?” Lavellan cried. Fen’Harel gave him another meaningful look, which was all the confirmation Lavellan needed. Fen’Harel was still going through with his plan. Another mad laughter bubbled in Lavellan’s throat, but it wouldn’t leave, so it stayed stuck. “You’re serious? You’re inviting the gods you’d locked away, so they’re no doubt *peeing angry*, back into this world?”

“I had plans.”

“Are they as stupid as your current one?” he snapped, rubbed his face. “Fenedhis, but you are a stupid fool. Wisdom, my ass!”

“Believe me,” he said dryly, “I know.”

“And forget the gods, you’d bring chaos upon the world.” And Fen’Harel had omitted the fact that his true goal was the reshaping of reality. So he could do... what? What did Fen’Harel plan to do once the elves regained their magic and most of the world was driven mad?

“I know,” Fen’Harel murmured. “But it must happen if the elves are to regain what they have lost.”

A frustrated noise scratched at the back of Lavellan’s throat. “Not at the cost of everyone else!”

“You said you wished to help the elves.”

“Helping them doesn’t mean I couldn’t give a flying fuck about the rest,” he snapped. “This world is—”

“This world is wrong,” Fen’Harel interrupted. “Born of my errors and mistakes. It does not understand that it was once more—”

“This world is different but that doesn’t make it any less important. It’s as different to the old world as the Fade is to the physical realm but that doesn’t invalidate—”

“You are not listening—”

“Stop interrupting—”

“My mistakes are the reason why your people dwell in the fringes of society, why they toil and suffer underfoot, why the Dalish pass along stories twisting with each retelling, and why your precious people do not have a home!”

Lavellan feared he’d cut the skin of his palms from how tight he was clenching his fists.

“We are not solely *your* mistakes.” Lavellan stabbed his finger into Fen’Harel’s chest, teeth gnashing, face no doubt pulled into an ugly vehemence. “Maybe your actions started a chain of events, but how we moved on, how we survived, how we continue to live afterwards, is the result of *our* actions. *Our* fights. You may have set us on this path, but you hadn’t been there for the journey. Who we’ve become has nothing to do with you.”

He quieted at the diatribe. Lavellan hated it whenever Fen’Harel — Solas — fell quiet during his outbursts. He was in too much of a fit to read Fen’Harel properly.

“But I suppose I should thank you,” Lavellan scoffed. “Ma serannas, Fen’Harel, for setting us on this path. You’ve taught us to spit back against a world who would wish to see us beneath its heel.

[Nu sil’josem on’el ghi’len.](#)^[3]”

“You mock me,” he finally hissed.

He threw his head back as a bitter and harsh laugh escaped him. “Unfortunately, Wolf, I am entirely serious.”

Fen’Harel’s expression contorted into a fury that Lavellan had only seen back in the days of old Elvhenan when Fen’Harel had been a young, tempestuous firebrand.

“This world is broken, is still breaking,” said Fen’Harel, “and I will not sit idly by when I know I have the means to fix it.”

“At the cost of what? The end of the fucking world?”

“The world will end with or without my intervention,” Fen’Harel spat, the reverb of his voice amplifying in a sorry attempt to intimidate Lavellan. “And if I leave it be, I assure you, you would *wish* I had torn the Veil down instead!”

Some of Lavellan’s ire vanished and his thoughts halted. Fen’Harel’s furious expression melted into shock.

That... What?

Asunara had said that Solas was trying to prevent a great danger but what was it? Was that it?

“What do you—?” Lavellan frowned, took a step forward, and Fen’Harel took one back. Out of instinct. Lavellan stopped. “You didn’t... mean to reveal that, did you?”

Innumerable emotions flashed in his eyes, all of them overwhelming, all of them unsaid and indecipherable, culminating into an expression that was *Solas* in essence.

I did not,” he said softly. “But you have a terrible habit of sweeping me away into revealing more than I should.”

“Is that my terrible habit or yours for succumbing?”

He smiled, pained. “Perhaps it is mine,” he conceded. “I have never been one for self-control, no matter how hard I try. You are a terrible force.”

Lavellan stared at him. “What’s happening to the world, lethallin?” Solas had never revealed this in his past life. Had never revealed this to anyone.

Fen’Harel stared back, helpless.

“I will find myself answering you, won’t I?” he asked.

“One way or another,” agreed Lavellan.

He shook his head. “Telling you the truth is a heavy burden.”

“You think I can’t handle it?”

“It matters not if you can or cannot. You will shoulder it regardless, heap it upon yourself with a complete disregard for your own wellbeing. I fear you will do what it takes to see it through so long as the cost is you and only you.”

“And that’s worse than your approach?”

“I do not want to lose you,” he snapped.

Lavellan clenched his fists again. “You’ll lose me anyway if you go through with this, you daft tit!”

They had already lost each other anyway.

“Not completely. There is a high possibility that you will survive the aftermath. Perhaps you will even find it better.”

Lavellan gave him a dark look. “Not if I stand against you.”

Fen’Harel returned it. “That is the outcome I feared.”

Another light breeze passed, made the dappled light dance across their faces.

“So tell me,” said Lavellan. “Help me understand.” Hadn’t he pleaded like this last time, too?

“Help me understand,” he begged and reached for Solas, who stepped back as if Lavellan’s mere touch would undo him.

Fen’Harel made to take another step back but Lavellan grabbed his wrist before he could and took another step into his space, reached up and cupped his cheek.

Something within Fen’Harel crumbled. He hung his head, face scrunching in his grief, shoulders bowing under the weight of all he was carrying. Lavellan gathered him in his arms. He rested his head on Lavellan’s shoulders, buried it into the crook of his neck, and hesitantly wrapped his arms around Lavellan’s waist.

Lavellan melted into the embrace, closed his eyes and let the sunlight flicker behind his lids when the leaves swayed with the breeze.

“Please tell me,” whispered Lavellan, his hold around Fen’Harel tightening. Lies had poisoned them. Rage had twisted them. “I don’t want to fight you. I can’t do that. I’ll break. Please.”

“I doubt anything can break you,” he said into Lavellan’s neck, voice muffled.

“You can.” *You had.* Lavellan knew he could rebuild himself, but he’d prefer not to break again. You could only rebuild yourself so many times, losing a part of yourself each time.

“I do not have that much power over you, if at all. I would not wish to.”

“We didn’t wish for worship, yet we have it. You didn’t wish to have such a hold on me.” He turned his head so he could also bury his face into Fen’Harel’s neck. “And I didn’t either. Yet you have it.”

Their breaths synced in the silence.

Fen’Harel eventually lifted his head and pressed their foreheads together, shared a solemn, meaningful gaze. In the clear daylight, his eyes’ true colour was grey, pupils ringed with what a purple so deep that it could have been brown, and Lavellan’s breath caught as it always did.

“You have it too,” said Fen’Harel. “Power over me.”

“That seems dangerous.”

The space between them lessened.

“It is,” Fen’Harel murmured.

“For you or for me?” Lavellan’s head slowly tilted of its own accord.

“Both.”

It was almost dreamlike, like this. Beneath the shade of the willow. No, not dreamlike, because it *was* a dream. This was a dream, and this time, Solas had come as another fragment of himself and Lavellan couldn’t do this.

Not like this.

It pained him, but he let one hand go and gently pressed his fingers against Fen’Harel’s lips, stopped him from kissing Lavellan.

“The truth,” Lavellan whispered. “About what’s happening.” He met Fen’Harel’s gaze, which held a mixture of sorrow and longing, but Lavellan pushed through despite the heartache. “About yourself. I refuse to be your plaything. I will not break beneath your teeth.”

“Vun’lin... You are not, and have never been, a plaything to me.”

“Then the truth,” he said.

Fen’Harel pulled away with some difficulty, as if an unseen force was tethering them together. He straightened to his full height and stepped back.

“You would demand the truth of me when you will not even give it yourself?”

Lavellan’s arms fell back by his sides after they felt cold just lingering in empty space and embracing a ghost. He looked away, the guilt gnawing.

“Do you know why I tested you earlier?” asked Fen’Harel.

Lavellan looked back at him. “Why?”

“I wished to ask if you would like to join me.”

His lips pressed into a hard line. “You wanted to recruit me as your agent?”

“No,” he said, nigh insulted. “I would not have you under me, but beside me. As a partner.”

Lavellan stared at him, brows raising slightly. Which manner of partner did he mean? But the shock was quick to fade, and he was back to frowning.

“You know my answer.”

Fen’Harel chuckled without mirth. “Yes.”

“Why?” asked Lavellan. “Why ask me this?”

“A moment of weakness,” he said. “The similarities I have observed between you and I... And, I suppose, you are a better leader than I.”

Lavellan blinked. “What?”

“The rate at which you earn loyalty, and the fervour of it, is frightening. And impressive.”

“That’s not a good thing.”

“And your awareness of it is also what makes you a good leader. You understand that power is poison, not prestige.”

He shook his head. “You know I’ll have to decline you, either way.”

“I know.”

“But I still want the truth. There must be another way, there has to be.”

The look he sent Lavellan was the very same he’d given when he’d bid Lavellan farewell. When he’d left him cold and hurting and empty.

“If there is, I have not found it. And we are running out of time.”

“So tell me what’s going on. If I just understand, maybe we can think of something else together.” His face twisted into something almost pleading. “This is no longer Elvhenan, our state of awareness differs, and I’m sorry. Truly, I am. But this world has learned to live while you slept, please.” His voice cracked and Fen’Harel’s expression turned pained once more. “This is our world.”

“What about mine?” he asked, his composure breaking. “What would you do if this world you dearly loved and fought for suffered because of *your* mistakes? In your attempts to help, what if instead, you deliver damnation? It is easy for you to disagree, easy for you to demand other ways, but you *do not know* the weight of what I carry. You cannot even comprehend it.”

“No,” he agreed. “No, maybe I can’t, but just... lighten the weight you’re carrying. It is too much for one man alone to bear, god or no god.”

“Apologies. The last time I shared the burden, I received a knife in my back for my troubles.”

“You think I would do that?”

“Out of the Evanuris and discounting Mythral, Dirthamen was one of my most trusted. Yet where did that leave me?”

Lavellan bit back a grimace. “Fen’Harel, if I were to ever stab you, I promise you’ll see it coming.”

He scoffed. “Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“At least you’ll be ready. You’ll likely kill me first though. Or perhaps whatever ominous world-ending event that’ll happen either way will kill us both, but I’ll never know because you’ve chosen to keep me in the dark.”

“The burdens that you carry weigh enough, and I’ve revealed too much already.” He stepped back.

Lavellan stepped forward. “I disagree. You’ve not revealed enough.”

“Focus on Corypheus first.”

“Fine,” Lavellan spat. “You’re not the only source of information I have. I’ll find other ways if you’re not going to give me the answer yourself.”

“Perhaps you’ll ask the Dalish and receive a fantasy for your troubles.”

“I’ll ask the Dalish and they will assist me as best as they can with what we’ve managed to salvage. Wipe that disdain out of your tone.”

Fen’Harel’s look grew cold. Lavellan stood his ground.

“You are dying, you know?” said Fen’Harel, voice and expression turning dark. “The orb which imparted that mark upon your hand is mine. You cannot carry the power meant for a god. Not for long. Perhaps I will wait for you to die first so I will stand unopposed.”

The words wrenched his ribs inwards and twisted into his lungs and heart. A scornful and disbelieving breath of laughter left him.

“I am not your plaything, huh,” Lavellan echoed, voice thin and faint, and he pressed his lips together as if that would keep the hurt from spilling. “I will not stoop to your petty attempts to drive me away. Hurt me if you must; I’ve had worse. Try stabbing me in the chest first. Maybe then. Probably not even.” Because he was still fucking here, wasn’t he? “And death can come for me if it wishes. I wrapped an empire around my finger in one night. Imagine what I can do in a month.”

“I have underestimated your pride.”

“You underestimated *me*.” Lavellan fixed him a resolute look. “And even if I die, someone will take my place. There is no shortage of people willing to do the right thing. Besides...” His look softened. “I always knew I’d die early.”

Another breath of silence, another span of heavy quiet. A leaf fell from the tree and fluttered over Lavellan’s hair and he pulled it away with a wry smile, twisting it between his fingers.

“Are you going to run now?” he asked Fen’Harel, smile turning derisive.

There was a loud crack, a terrible noise, and the sunlit scene around them collapsed into smoke and dark shadows. They slithered and gathered around Fen’Harel, formed the shadow of a six-eyed wolf looming above him, left them both in the hazy backdrop of the Fade. A stage stripped of its props.

Lavellan laughed scornfully. “That’s a yes, then.”

The shadows fell upon Fen’Harel, shielding the upper half of his face once more. He said nothing.

“I don’t give up easily, just so you know,” warned Lavellan. “I will find out the truth. But tell me something...” He gazed not at the wolf but at the man beneath. “Are you sincere about me?”

“It does not matter now,” he said, his voice back to a powerful and unnerving reverb. “You will not kiss or love a liar. It seems you revile the taste of yourself on another’s lips.”

“You’re wrong,” murmured Lavellan. “I *can* love a liar.”

He already did.

Lavellan looked away. “I’ll tell you the truth,” he said, forcing the words out through the thickness of his throat, “if you come forward and reveal who you are.”

“If I do not wish to?”

Lavellan shrugged, smiling in resignation. "Then that's that."

The dream collapsed further around them, fragments of the Fade's emerald skies peering through the smoke and shadows.

"If you cannot love a liar," said Fen'Harel, "then I cannot love a man who lives to die."

Of all the hurtful words they had hurled at one another, that was the one which finally struck, made him flinch.

"Then I guess we both have to change," said Lavellan.

"Can we?"

Lavellan surveyed the scene before him, mourning the loss of the floating garden and the willow.

"Not in a dream," he said and summoned his shadows. The dark mist descended. As it thickened, he met Fen'Harel's gaze, grey eyes cutting through the dark tar and mist. Lavellan raised his arms.

Brought them down. Tore the dream open.

He woke himself up.

Lavellan stared at the canopy of the bed, early morning sunlight spilling through the slits of the heavy Orlesian curtains. The room was still dim.

After a few more moments of letting the dream settle, he sat up and swung his legs over the side, head falling in his hands. Despite the rest, he was fatigued. It was a deeper fatigue. Bone-deep. It overlaid his usual exhaustion.

"Fuck," he whispered into the dim, empty room.

Chapter End Notes

Next week's update will be late because I have exams (ew). I'll probably update on Saturday. If there is no update, then assume my brain got fried haha.

Childish_Midget has done not [one](#), not [two](#), but [THREE](#) MORE sketches for this fic <3 I'm so Blessed. Thank you, mwah, I love you as much as Hanon loves macarons. I've also put those sketches in their corresponding chapters as accompanying pieces. Shower her with love y'all she's fantastic and lovely and very sweet.

And! [Solas POV](#) for Halamshiral because the devil works hard but damn do i work harder when i'm procrastinating on the projects and assignments and exams that are headed for my ass.

(And I shit you not, [Solas has purple in his eyes](#).)

Also, more of these idiots speaking in verse if you're interested:

[Solas speaks in iambic pentameter – steady]

"The burdens that you carry weigh enough

And I've revealed too much already." (but he leaves the last iamb unfinished – only 9

syllables instead of 10 - he's drawing back)

[Lavellan replies in complete meter, trying to keep Solas engaged and get him to continue]

"I disagree. You've not revealed enough."

"Focus on Corypheus first." > abrupt change from iambic (da-DUM) to trochaic (DUM-da); no longer willing to engage Lavellan. He dropped the pentameter (10 syllables) and adopted the tetrameter (8); drawing back even further

-Fine- [Lavellan drops the verse and accepts it isn't going anywhere]

Is that extra of me? Absolutely. Did I have fun? Absolutely.

Translation

[1] **Vin, ma Venuralas:** Yes, my Deity^[1]

[2] **El'ras'amelan:** Keepers of Secrets and Shadows^[1]

[3] **Nu sil'josem on'el ghi'len:** Pain has served as the greatest teacher^[1]

Song of the nightingale

Chapter Notes

SORRY FOR THE WAIT! Here you go :D And thank you to everyone who wished me well on my exams <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

beacons in the dark—

His companions loitered beside the carriages at the palace's courtyard, ready for the trip back to Skyhold. Lavellan joined them, shambled more than walked. He didn't feel well-rested at all, as if he'd never slept.

Before their departure, Briala arrived with a small group of servants bearing gifts. She and Lavellan shared a look and he followed her to a corner of the courtyard beside a flowerbed.

She sat on its edge and crossed her arms, appraising him. "You don't look well."

"Guess who paid me a surprise visit," he grumbled.

Her eyes widened behind the mask. "In person?"

"No, gods forbid he be that straightforward," he said. "He visited my dreams. Pissed me off while he was at it, too. I yanked control of my dream away from him so I could walk out on him, but that was more exhausting than I thought."

She smiled. "Slamming the door on him?"

"In a way."

"As *close friends* do," she said and he scowled at her tone. "Did he mention anything about the eluvians?"

"I asked him," he said. "He didn't say why he needed it but he did say why he left you three."

"Oh? I suppose it isn't out of the goodness of his heart?"

Lavellan looked away. "He says he wants to be proven wrong."

A lull descended, filled only by the soft and distant chatter of his companions.

"Wrong about what?" Briala eventually asked.

"Hell if I know." He rubbed his eyes. "He also said something worrying. That something bigger is coming. I'm not sure what since he kept stalling, but whatever it is, he considers it much worse than tearing the Veil."

Briala put her hand to her chin in thought. "I can procure you some scholars, if you have need of them."

“I’ll let you know,” he said. “I’ll try to do some digging myself. If I get the time.”

Dorian called for him and gestured at the carriages. Ready to go it seemed. Briala stood and smiled at him, holding out her hand.

He took and shook it. “Happy hunting, Marquise Briala. I wish you the best.”

“And you, Inquisitor. Remember, you have a friend in Orlais.”

“And you have one in a snowy mountain.”

“In a castle.”

“Look at us. At the height of luxury.”

Briala shot him an admonishing look for the pun as they walked back together. Just as Lavellan was about to enter the carriage, Briala called for him to wait. He turned. She shoved a box into his hands.

“Macarons,” she said and a childish gasp escaped him, a delighted beam spreading across his face. “The box is enchanted. It will keep them fresh for a month—”

“I’ll finish these in a day.”

“Don’t—”

“I’m going to *inhale* them.”

Briala sighed and chuckled. He shared a final smile with her, then entered his carriage and threw self-restraint out the window, opening the box in glee. Lavellan smiled down at the assortment of macarons and immediately ate one. He hummed, smile widening.

Someone knocked.

He jumped and slapped the lid over the box in his panic, putting it aside and shoving the rest of the macaron in his mouth as he opened the door. Cole blinked up at him, Vergala on his shoulders. They stared at each other. Lavellan chewed once.

“You’re allowed to be happy,” said Cole.

Lavellan chewed the rest quickly and swallowed. “I was just startled.”

Cole frowned. “You’re always waiting for it to go bad. So you think you’re not allowed. You’re allowed.”

“It’s just a macaron,” he laughed nervously.

“It is,” agreed Cole. “But then, it’ll be the world.”

Lavellan stared.

“Can I come in?” asked Cole as if he hadn’t just slapped Lavellan verbally.

“I— Yeah.” He let Cole in and closed the door. Vergala settled on Lavellan’s lap. Through the window, he spied Solas on horseback, speaking to Samara. Lavellan closed the curtain.

Cole watched him with too-bright eyes. “Words twist, tear, full of teeth. Why do you hurt each other?”

Lavellan held Vergala close and petted her head, her crest flattening beneath his hand before it fluffed back up.

“Because he wants to push me away. I do it because my temper is terrible.”

“You do it because you want him to fight for you.”

He paused his petting, but Vergala squawked, so he resumed, hands now trembling.

“Maybe,” he said.

Cole shook his head. “It’s not maybe. It’s yes.”

“You’re brutal, Cole.”

The whip cracked and the carriage moved.

Maybe Lavellan did want Solas to fight for it, for them, instead of letting it go. Fight to make this work. But could you do that when the choice came down to your lover or the world? Because Lavellan knew his choice.

He'd done it before.

“Just because you did doesn’t mean you want to do it again,” said Cole. He fiddled with the hem of his sleeves. “But it’s different this time. He gave them a chance. It’s dangerous. You’re a current and he’s being swept away and his head is going under. You could drown him.”

“He could drown me, too,” Lavellan murmured. “But I’m being hypocritical, aren’t I? I demand the truth when I won’t even grant him the same courtesy.” But he needed Solas to do this first. He needed Solas to step forward and tell the truth because then, maybe Solas’ past reassurances of their relationship’s sincerity hadn’t been empty words. Maybe it hadn’t all been a convoluted game. Maybe every smile, every kiss, every touch, hadn’t been a lie, hadn’t been a *necessity*. Maybe...

“Maybe you mattered, after all,” finished Cole.

“I want you to know that what we had was real.”

Was it?

Lavellan blinked away the stinging in his eyes. Too tired for tears.

“You promised to tell if he does it first.” Cole looked at him, ghostly eyes vivid behind his blond fringe. “But you have two. Which one?”

And Lavellan smiled a broken smile, hated himself as he said, “Whichever lets me run for longer.”

Florianne crossed the Great Hall with her head held high as Josephine listed the charges against

her, still proudly wearing the Chalons family mask. You would never catch an Orlesian noble dead without their mask, after all.

Lavellan searched the crowd for Solas, but he caught himself. Force of habit. One he needed to rid himself of. He gripped the armrest and focused on Florianne instead. The intimidating shadow of his throne slashed over her as she stopped by the base of the steps.

Vergala flew in and perched on a sunray crowning the back of his seat. What an image this must make.

“How is my party so far, Florianne?” he asked with a smile he couldn’t feel.

She scoffed. “I would give it a three, Inquisitor. Out of twenty.”

“We’re missing a jester,” he said. “Are you volunteering?”

Florianne smiled grimly. “You and I both want this over and done with. Deal with me as you see fit. I may despise your victory, but I respect your mastery of the Game.”

He wiped the humour from his expression as he leaned back and rested his cheek on his fist. The farce of appearing in control of himself.

“You realise Corypheus is not a man who keeps his promises now, don’t you?” he asked.

She smiled. “And what of you? Are you a man who keeps your promises?”

“You stand in front of me in chains. That is answer enough.”

“And what promise does this answer?”

Lavellan only smiled back and said, “Lady Florianne, you remain a creature of opportunity and formality. We have use for both. Let’s see you dance for the Inquisition.”

Well, here was another decision to be met with controversy and disapproval. Again.

Murmurs rippled across the Hall. Her eyes squinted in delight behind the mask.

“One must remember the Game is never truly over, Your Worship,” she said. “How refreshing that you are willing to place your head inside the lion’s maw. Not many have the courage to test its teeth.”

His smile turned wry. “More a wolf than a lion.”

“Is there a difference?”

“The level of foolishness,” he said. “Return her to the cell in the meantime while we prepare suitable accommodations.”

The guards took her away and Lavellan caught sight of Solas retreating into the rotunda. So he’d watched after all. Lavellan stood and Vergala perched on his shoulders.

“I felt about twenty disapproving stares,” he said as Josephine approached.

“There will always be disapproving stares, Inquisitor,” said Josephine gently. “We cannot please everyone. I trust you know what you’re doing.”

“That’s dangerous,” he said and Josephine laughed.

“Very good, Inquisitor. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some letters to peruse.”

At her departure, Leliana stepped forward from the dispersing crowd, cutting a foreboding figure as always.

“Leliana,” he greeted. “Is everything alright?”

Leliana clasped her hands behind her back and angled her head as a signal to follow. They walked back to the rookery.

“I have a few matters I wished to discuss,” she said. “And I also have a letter from your clan.”

His throat dried and he nodded.

There were two letters waiting for them on her rookery table, one rolled and tied with a halla leather cord. That was the first thing she gave. His lips pinched together as he read it.

“The Wycome nobles have fled and are now spreading false rumours about the elves,” he reiterated and rerolled the letter. “The Keeper fears a retaliation, but she refuses to leave the city elves to die.” His heart warmed at the display of solidarity. He turned to Vergala on his shoulders. “Tell Josephine and Cullen we’ll have an emergency Council at sundown.”

She cawed and took off. He rubbed his eyes.

“Thank you for that,” he said and gave her a small smile. “How have you been?”

She glanced at the alcove housing the small shrine she’d often pray at. “I assume you’ve heard of the Chantry looking to me or Cassandra to be Divine.”

“I did,” he said. “Thoughts?”

Leliana looked at the other letter on the table, something uncertain in her usually self-assured demeanour. She picked the letter up, tracing the edges of it gingerly.

“I received this letter from Divine Justinia,” she murmured.

Oh.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly.

“Yes, thank you for the concern.” She fiddled with it, the edges wrinkling in her hands. “This was a contingency plan in the case of sudden death. She must have written this months, even years in advance. I’m to go to a chantry in Valence, a small village on the Waking Sea, to find something she’s hidden there.”

“If you’re asking for leave, I grant it,” he said but he already anticipated her next request.

“Will you go with me? It is alright if you cannot.”

He smiled sincerely despite the flipping of his stomach. “Only if we don’t go by boat. I get seasick. You should’ve seen me on the way to the Conclave. It was stormy too.” He greened just thinking about it. “It was awful.”

“From seasickness to Andraste’s chosen,” she said and chuckled. “We can take the Imperial

Highway to Val Royeaux but we must catch a ship from there onwards. It won't take long and it's unlikely we'll be caught by a storm."

"Better be unlikely. But alright, we can discuss the arrangements during the Council later."

"Thank you for this, Inquisitor."

"You're welcome," he said and made to leave, but his eye fell on the nightingale carving dangling from her dagger sheath. His gaze softened. "Why did you stop me from letting Celene die?"

"I did not stop you," she said and placed Divine Justinia's letter down. "I reminded you. You were free to ignore me, yet you did not."

"Why remind me then?"

She leaned against the table edge and drummed her fingers against it. "It did not seem like you."

"No?"

"Do you take offence?"

Lavellan frowned. "No. I'm just..." He fiddled with the leather cord and glanced out the small window. "Was it really unlike me?"

"You have always gone out of your way to avoid using life as a currency. You personally handwrite condolence letters to the families of our fallen no matter how long it takes; you offer mercy even to those who have made attempts on your life. It was surprising when you announced you would willingly throw Celene's life away for your plans."

He bowed his head, trained his gaze at the floor. Leliana's stare prickled at his skin.

"You excelled at court," she said, "yet you seemed like a different person. Was that a mask, Inquisitor, or is this the mask?"

"I have many faces, is all," he murmured. "The very act of changing them is me, apparently."

She stared at him, half-baffled, half-intrigued.

"Apparently," she echoed.

Lavellan smiled at her. "I'll see you this afternoon."

After directing Cullen to send troops to Wycome immediately and settling business for the Arbor Wilds, he and Leliana left for Valence the next morning.

He feared that the trip would be awkward but Leliana was a good conversationalist, and without the pressures of appearing as Inquisitor and Spymaster, they could just be Lavellan and Leliana for a meagre moment. Free of the burdens of their carefully cultivated images. She shared stories about Tabris and the miscellaneous jobs they had been on, while he shared stories of his time with Clan Lavellan. Homesickness once again twisted his gut.

“Do you wish to return?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, “but not to stay. I don’t think I can anymore.”

“It is different, no? Once you have walked the world and seen that it is bigger than you ever knew.” She stared at him, grey eyes shrewd. “I do not believe you have stayed with your clan your whole life before the Conclave.”

“Oh?” he asked.

She smiled. “That is not a no.”

“It’s not a yes, either.”

“No,” she agreed, “but it is still an answer.”

“And what would that be?”

“That you wish for someone to infer your past without you needing to tell them. It saves you the confrontation.”

Clever Leliana. “Maybe,” he conceded and looked out the carriage window. “But you won’t.”

“Cole has determined it,” she said. “I could ask him.”

“He won’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

Lavellan closed his eyes and leaned back, settling his interlocked fingers over his stomach.

“Because I taught him that some people shouldn’t have the easy way out. I failed to realise that included me.”

“You have an air about you. As if you are older than your body.”

He opened his eyes and met Leliana’s steady stare. “I’m curious. What have you theorised about me? Let’s see if you’re close to the truth.”

She smiled that mischievous smile of hers. A special brand of Leliana. “Only my speculations? Or shall we include the entire inner circle’s? Varric has a good one of his own.”

He groaned. “Let’s hear it.”

“He speculates that you are an ancient elven prince. He’s already written something short about it. It’s a good read. Perhaps you can ask to see it.”

Lavellan burst out laughing. “He does realise that would imply I’m an Elvhen god?” Him as an elven prince— He’d *served* a prince, or the equivalent of one anyway.

“Solas said something similar in response.”

He hid his face in his hands. “Bet he was insulted by that.”

“Unimpressed,” she said, smiling. “I believe we may have triggered a little overprotectiveness on his end.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The discussion had led to them speculating that you are the Dread Wolf.”

“Oh Creators,” he whispered under his breath. This was his life now?

“Solas scolded us,” she recalled with a small smile. “He said that you are already the Herald, and that you do not need another mantle of divinity on your shoulders.”

A little of his ire at Solas softened. Only a little.

Leliana continued, “The Iron Bull speculates that you once belonged to an assassin’s guild of sorts and escaped that life of darkness, hence your adamance for mercy and forgiveness.”

“Slightly more reasonable than ancient elven prince or being the Dread fucking Wolf, for that matter,” he said, torn between horrified laughter and unhinged yelling.

“I amend that you were likely a spymaster.”

“Oh?”

“You prefer to operate subtly, and you value the weight of information as a weapon. You think ahead and prepare contingency plans.”

“That’s not specific to spymasters,” he pointed out.

“No, she said and narrowed her eyes, “but you play to the shadows, reliant upon it. You are content to not be the brightest or loudest in the room, you fight where you’re needed, and you extend your reach quietly by being everywhere yet nowhere at once. You leave nothing to chance.”

Lavellan smiled. “Maybe I just have the makings of a spymaster.”

“You navigated court with a surprising mastery that you couldn’t have accrued over months, no matter how prodigious you are. Some things you can only gain through experience.”

“Fascinating,” was his evasive answer.

“So I propose that you are not an elven prince, but rather, the spymaster of an elven prince.” She smiled, the squint of her eyes now from smugness over scrutiny. “Or was. Clearly, you cannot be their spymaster anymore. And since most of your gods are locked away, that only leaves one viable candidate.”

He almost choked on his spit.

“You are not the Dread Wolf, rather, you were his spymaster.”

Lavellan stared for a beat of silence, then he laughed, the sound crossing the line into manic. Leliana stared back, unfazed.

“I have also heard that the orb which imparted the mark upon your hand is elven,” she continued. “A channel of power for one of your gods. So perhaps you are still acting in his name.”

He laughed harder.

“Skyhold has also been the site of an ancient elven ritual and its history is shrouded in mystery. Solas is the one to lead us to it. It’s possible you are both working for him.”

Lavellan gave up on making coherent noises and succumbed to his laughing fit while Leliana waited patiently for him to regain his articulacy. He was surprised Leliana didn't make the leap that Solas was the Dread Wolf, but to be fair, he was irritatingly good at being unassuming and Lavellan's actions the past few months had been more suspicious. Lavellan was the one who'd played tricks while wearing a wolf mask during Satinalia. He was the one who'd given Solas the wolf charms. He was the one who'd kept alluding to wolves and making puns about them. He was the one with the ominous bullshit.

But he had to hand it to her — she was closer than she realised. And yet, so far.

"Solas hates the elven gods, you realise?" he asked.

"And it was Fen'Harel who imprisoned them. Convenient." She scrutinised him. "You do not deny it?"

"That I work for the Dread Wolf? Never suggest that again."

"You are not going to answer, are you?" she asked.

"Obviously not. But maybe our minds work similarly enough for you to figure me out. Who knows?"

Leliana stayed quiet, searched his eyes, and Lavellan let her collect whatever it was she was searching for.

"Unfortunately, Inquisitor, there is a key difference between us that stops me from truly understanding you," she said.

"Which is?"

She looked out the carriage window. "Forgiveness."

"I— What?"

"You are forgiving, willing to provide others a second chance if they are genuinely repentant." She smiled, gaze faraway. "I question those choices of yours often, especially if there is no further use for them."

"They're people, not pieces."

"That is what I mean. No matter how similar we are, I can never fully understand, nor can I comprehend. I must be cold and ruthless."

"That's not true," he murmured. "You are neither of those."

"I am. I must be to keep us safe."

"Is that what you tell yourself?" he asked. Dear Leliana who'd had a clear shot, who could have ended him with an arrow to the heart before Solas could use him to hurt anybody else (not that Solas had, but there hadn't been any guarantees at that time).

But she hadn't been able to shoot.

Leliana stayed quiet. He nudged her foot and she glanced back at him.

"I know you're a good person, Leliana," he said. "You have the capacity to be forgiving and

merciful. I believe you do.”

Leliana laughed to herself. “You see? Even now, you say such things.”

“Remember in Haven when you didn’t kill your agent after his betrayal?”

“You asked me not to.”

He snorted. “I was a stranger to you. An acquaintance or business partner at best. You didn’t do it for me. You wanted someone to tell you it was alright.”

“I cannot hesitate.”

“Do you think mercy is hesitation?”

She paused, frowned. “I—” She shook her head and looked out the window once more. “This is different.”

“How?” he challenged.

Leliana didn’t answer. All Lavellan could do was look out the window with her and watch the fields of the Dales roll past, watch the inkblots of birds writing unseen messages on the parchment of the skies.

Silence in a chantry was often a symptom of reverence, a result of meditative respect. Not this silence. The Valence cloister held its breath, as still as Fen’Harel’s old bedroom in the dream that Solas had shown him from what felt like a lifetime ago. Early morning light diffused through the stained glass and graced them with bursts of red and gold.

Leliana genuflected at Andraste’s statue. Should he genuflect as well since he was ‘Andraste’s chosen’? Then again, you could argue that he was also Fen’Harel’s (accidental) chosen but he wasn’t genuflecting at wolf statues any time soon.

“It’s just as I remember,” said Leliana.

“You’ve been here before?”

“Tabris and I visited Justinia after the Blight. Although, she was still Dorothea then.”

They walked through the hall. Lavellan eyed the statue of Maferath the Betrayer, his face hidden in his hands in shame. For some reason, it reminded him of Solas. Perhaps it was the general air of guilt around the statue, or perhaps it was because Solas mirrored Maferath’s role in Lavellan’s life as lover and betrayer.

“It’s too quiet,” he said. “I feel uneasy.”

Vergala flew off his shoulders, perched on Maferath’s head, and promptly took a shit. Lavellan swallowed back a childish laugh.

“It’s quite early,” said Leliana, unaware of Vergala’s little detour. Her reminiscing gaze traced the statues, the columns, the ceiling. “The Chant won’t start for a while. I’m sure the sisters are

somewhere.”

“Leliana?” a soft voice asked. “Is that you?”

They turned towards the voice. Sister Natalie entered the Chantry, the perfect picture of meek serenity.

Leliana smiled. “Natalie!”

Memories flitted through his head — images of Natalie’s slitted throat, her blood pooling on the marble floors as Andraste’s painting watched on in placid apathy.

Leliana hugged Natalie and looked up at Lavellan with a warning in her gaze while Natalie’s back was turned to him.

Once the introductions were out of the way, they wandered the Chantry and inspected its paintings as they followed the clues Justinia had left behind. Leliana kept up a stream of easy conversation with Natalie in the background. He smiled at her well-chosen yet casual questions.

“Do they still sing the Benedictions on Fridays?” asked Leliana. “That was Justinia’s favourite.”

“Of course.”

His smile disappeared upon recollection of how this would end.

They solved the puzzle far too soon. Andraste’s portrait hadn’t even opened fully yet before Leliana had Natalie pinned against the base of Andraste’s statue with a knife to her throat.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Leliana. “They never sing the Benedictions on Fridays, Natalie.”

“Leliana,” Lavellan warned.

“I’m protecting us,” she said, clipped, and returned her attention to Natalie. “You were lying from the start.”

Natalie pursed her lips defiantly and stared Leliana down.

“Don’t worry,” said Leliana, “you already gave me what I needed. Your answers point to Morelle in the Dales. Grand Cleric Victoire’s bastion. She’s always been opposed to Justinia, silent as she was about it, and now she’s sent you to find what she’s hidden, no doubt.”

Natalie scowled. “The Inquisition has turned Thedas away from the true Chantry. It must be stopped.”

Lavellan burst out laughing. A quaint sentiment. He recognised that it was his pride speaking, but could he be blamed? Stop the Inquisition? When it had faced off (and won) against an ancient darkspawn magister? When its key members had hunted down and tracked the Dread Wolf?

“Mother Victoire is loved by many. The Inquisition has more enemies than you know,” Natalie said, perhaps in a bid to regain whatever small foothold she’d had in the conversation before Lavellan’s sudden fit of mirth. He cleared his throat and forced himself to stop.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “An ancient darkspawn magister hasn’t managed to stop us, is all I’m saying. Unless the grand cleric is an ancient darkspawn magister?”

“I suppose she could count as ancient,” said Leliana, smiling, but her smile faded as she rounded

her lethal look on Natalie, the killing intent ready. She pressed the knife deeper.

“Leliana,” he called out again, “release her. She’s no threat.”

“The grand cleric—”

“Is one woman. We are the Inquisition. What enemies we make or confront, we can handle.”

Leliana looked at him over her shoulder, her expression set, grey eyes flashing. Looked upon him with the same grey eyes that had flickered with hesitation during the final battle, her otherwise steady bow suddenly wavering.

“She’s different,” murmured Tabris as she watched Leliana, but Lavellan could tell she’d meant to say, What have you done?

“Laurel leaves,” he reminded softly and her set expression faltered.

Leliana glanced back at Natalie, the silence and hesitation lingering.

Lavellan tensed as the seconds passed, the knife against Natalie’s throat neither slicing nor retracting.

You are not ruthless, you are not cold.

He opened his mouth, but whatever words he had prepared died as Leliana lowered the knife.

She stepped away.

He was so taken aback that he took an actual step back.

“The Inquisitor has spoken,” said Leliana, and holy shit? “Go run. Tell your mistress that she has a choice.” She stood beside Lavellan and scowled at Natalie. “The Inquisition is coming.”

She and Natalie shared a meaningful look, before Natalie nodded and retreated. Nobody spoke. Not until the Chantry doors closed, the slam of it echoing in the space. Lavellan stared at Leliana. Leliana met his stare with a raised brow.

“Why do you look so surprised? You are the one who ordered it.”

“Yes, but...” *But you disregarded me last time.* Lavellan shook his head, a mantra of *holy shit* flitting through his head. “Is that the only reason you let her go? Because I ordered it?”

She glanced away. “No,” she murmured and walked past him towards the alcove that the opened painting had revealed. Within it sat a small, ornate box on a pedestal. The box had a neat slit in place of a keyhole and Leliana stared at her small bard knife, then at the slit.

“Justinia gifted me this knife,” she said and they shared a brief look. Lavellan nodded.

She slipped it in, the blade fitting perfectly, and turned it. The box unlocked. Leliana swung the lid open but he already knew it would be empty. More of a symbolic gesture than a practical one.

“No!” cried Leliana at the empty box. “There’s nothing!”

“Emptiness doesn’t mean absence.”

“A lovely sentiment, Inquisitor,” she said, “but— Wait. There’s an inscription on the lid.”

He shrugged with an air of *I-told-you-so* and Leliana looked at him with an air of *I'm-still-holding-a-knife*.

“The Left Hand should lay down her burden,” Leliana read, and her confusion morphed into something crestfallen. “She’s... releasing me. A thousand lies and a thousand deaths and it’s always the Left Hand that reaches out. It was my conscience which bore the consequences.”

“What she said in the Fade...”

“All along, she was afraid she was using me as I’ve been used in the past. But she gambled with the fate of nations. She needed me.” Leliana frowned. “I was the only one who could do it.

Dirthamen keeps the empire together, his strings unseen yet sure. Take them away and it all unravels.

I am his greatest string, his longest, strongest. I cannot fail. I will not fail.

I never fail.

Lavellan placed the memory aside. It was less intrusive this time, more like a coat of dust that he had to brush off him instead of a brick to the teeth.

She turned the bard knife in her hands. “She gave this to me, and now she wants me to put it down and lock it away.”

“Lay it down,” he said. “Let her rest. Let yourself rest.”

Leliana smiled at the box. “If it were not for you, I would’ve killed Natalie and called it a good thing.” She stared at the bard knife, her eyes reflecting on the blade, before she gently placed it into the box. Her careful hands closed the lid.

The box clicked. Locked.

They stood over the box, draped in the quiet of the Chantry and the scrutiny of Andraste’s many likenesses.

“I almost lost myself...” she murmured, ran gentle fingers over the carved rose atop the lid. “How do you do it?”

He glanced at her. “Do what?”

“How do you not lose yourself to the shadows?”

“I lost myself to them before,” he said. “I was a real piece of shit.”

Leliana smiled. “I can imagine. You are nigh insufferable now.”

“You wound me,” he said and laughed, but the teasing faded from his expression and tone. He sighed, the sound worn. “It’s hard when the shadows are your post and weapon. You need a light to keep you grounded.”

“You are the beacon in the dark, Mahanon,” she said. “For me and for many. I saw you as someone who knew his way through the shadows unerringly, but it... It helps knowing that you stumble and that you manage despite this.”

Lavellan stared at her again. This morning wasn't going the way he'd expected. The Leliana he'd grown to know would have never said these things.

This was a different person.

This was a stranger who was wearing a friend's face. But, no— They were the same person. Or... not. What even made a person who they were? Their appearance? Experiences? Was this person before him who wore the name and face of Leliana someone different?

Was his Leliana dead?

Was he the only one alive from that old world which now only existed in his unreliable memories?

“Kallian is my light,” said Leliana and he snapped himself out of those thoughts. “Though it's difficult with her so far away.”

“Does Cassandra know you knew where Tabris had run off to?” he asked with a small smile, injected some levity to banish those thoughts. “And that you pulled a Varric?”

“Now, now, there's no need to pick at a healing sore.” She smiled at him. “Who or what is your light, Inquisitor?”

He looked up in thought, watched the play of light through the rich, stained-glass window depicting the prominent figures of the Andrastian faith. Shartan was lost within the crowd of believers behind Andraste, tucked away to the point that you wouldn't even see him unless you were looking, wearing a hood which conveniently hid his ears.

One day, would they dock Lavellan's ears too? Erase his vallaslin? Vehemently deny that the Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste had been a Dalish elf? Would they twist his legacy into something far removed from itself? Or would they be content to forget him just like all the elves before him who had accomplished great things, who had changed the world? Shartan, Garahel, Inquisitor Ameridan... All of them had been erased. Was that the fate awaiting him?

No matter how loud Lavellan roared, how much of his blood he'd smeared along the walls, would it one day brown and fade into the plaster? Gone. Never there.

What would Solas do if that came to pass and he lived long enough to see it? What if Lavellan failed this time, too? Would Solas be left roaming his new world, having averted whatever crisis was looming over the horizon, wallowing in his never-ending regrets and mourning the price he'd paid? What place would Lavellan have in that new world? Would he paint Lavellan upon the walls? Tell the story of a forgotten hero from a forgotten world?

Or did he plan to die once he completed his duties?

“Inquisitor?” asked Leliana.

Lavellan blinked, then shook his head with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. “Sorry, my thoughts wandered. But my lights? They carry the carvings I made for them.”

They were reminders for his companions. For him, too.

A reminder to never take them for granted.

“Shall we make a pact?” he asked.

“I do so love pacts.”

He held out his hand. “We stop each other from getting lost in the shadows?” he asked.

“You have a deal,” she said and shook his hand.

“We’ll take shifts,” he teased. “Oh no, what if our shifts overlap?”

Leliana snorted. “Then you ask Solas. He will find something for you to disagree with and you will willingly leave the shadows just to yell at him.”

“Can we please travel back to Skyhold without you nagging me about Solas?”

“It was hardly nagging. I can show you true nagging.”

“And you call me insufferable?”

Josephine praised Leliana for her incredible restraint upon return and Leliana grimaced like a beleaguered bird. Still, Leliana seemed lighter.

The contrast between this Leliana and the one he'd known pressed at Lavellan and it invited uncomfortable thoughts that he had no wish of entertaining, so he threw himself into trying to determine what the terrible thing Solas had hinted at was. He managed to borrow a book on obscure elven lore from Morrigan and retreated to the garden.

The flowers Lavellan had planted were blooming wonderfully. Little dots of cheerful colour.

Maybe he could plant some wisteria...

He caught himself and shooed that thought away.

Lavellan settled on a bench and started the book. Parts of the book were in Elvish but Morrigan had annotated the margins with translations, not that he needed them. She'd made a valiant effort, though she'd still missed the nuances.

“You’re the Inquisitor.”

Lavellan looked up from the book, slightly disoriented from being pulled out of a focused state, and met Kieran’s wide and wondering eyes.

Kieran tilted his head. “Mother didn’t tell me the Inquisitor was an elf.”

Lavellan closed the book. “Was it the blood or the whispers?”

“Both,” he said, unmoved by the cryptic question. “It’s very loud in your head. It’s loud in mine, too, but only when I dream.”

“They’re quiet in my dreams,” said Lavellan. “But something else is loud.”

"The past," he agreed. "What did it feel like?"

"Which? The past?"

His gaze remained unerring as he said, "No, dying."

"Hurt."

Kieran shook his head. "No, the other one."

"I don't know," said Lavellan, frowning. "I've forgotten."

He deflated. "Oh. And I was going to ask why your people wanted to look like that. Now you don't remember."

Lavellan stayed quiet, scrutinised him. He should have probably been more unnerved, but after being battered by ominous elven bullshit for so long, he'd gained an immunity to unnerving omens and comments.

Flemeth had taken Kieran's Old God Soul but had it returned to him once time had reversed? What was Flemeth up to? Surely she knew what was going on by now.

She'd known where Kieran had been because of the Well of Sorrows.

"Kieran," Lavellan started, something knotting in his throat, "has your grandmother spoken to you lately?"

He shook his head. Lavellan wasn't certain whether that was a good or a bad thing. Was she biding her time? If so, for what?

"You're not scared of me," said Kieran, beaming. "The others usually are."

Lavellan returned the smile. "People are usually scared of uncertainty," he said. Kieran was all of that wrapped up in a child.

"They're scared of you too. They fear the next age if it comes too soon." He sat with Lavellan.

"What are you reading?"

"Something big is coming," said Lavellan, "and the gods are unhelpful so I want to find out what it is myself."

"The gods? The Wolf?"

"Yes."

"He's here. Aren't you afraid?"

"No."

Kieran fidgeted. "Mother says you should never play with the gods. They'll play you instead."

"I know," Lavellan murmured, but he shook his head and smiled once more. "But that's such a dreary conversation for such a nice garden. Would you like to read with me?"

He pouted and swung his legs. "I should be studying."

“Studying what?”

“Mother wants me to learn old words from your people.”

“Would you like some help? I’m a walking archive.”

His expression brightened. “Yes, please!” Such a polite boy. Kieran frowned though. “But you don’t listen to the whispers enough. You’ve forgotten how to.”

“I can still listen.”

“Not those whispers. The other one! You hold smoke better than water. That’s why it’s so quiet.”

Lavellan stared. It had been foolish of him to think that Kieran couldn’t surprise him.

“I’ll go get my books!” Kieran said and left. Lavellan frowned down at his book, ran his thumb over its edges. Cryptic comment aside, perhaps it was time to consult the Well, but Keiran was right. The more Lavellan pushed the Well aside, the harder it became for him to get an answer. It had been responsive the first time he’d drank, but the years had worn on and the whispers had become ambient noise. And now, he’d only hear them if they wished to be heard.

Better than nothing.

Lavellan closed his eyes and eased back into the whispers, let them curl around the edges of his conscious.

“[*Ahn Fen’Harel esayal diana?*](#)^[11]” he asked.

The whispers shifted, waves overlapping, collective voices gathering and uniting into a chorus. It took a while. His brows scrunched in concentration as he waded through the noise.

The waves rescinded.

He scrunched his face. *Come back here—!*

A hiss. The waves roared. But Lavellan stood his ground.

Eventually, the waves eased and the indecipherable whispers became discernible.

[*Alas’enes din,*](#)^[21] it answered.

Alright, he should have been more specific.

“[*Ahn judin alas’en?*](#)^[31]”

Daur.

His eyes flew open, met Kieran’s patient gaze. How long had he been standing there for?

“What did they say?” Kieran asked.

Lavellan chewed on his lip. “They told me what will end the world.”

“What is it?”

He clutched at the book.

“Malice.”

Chapter End Notes

The Breath of the Wild reference was accidental haha.

And Leliana has been softened! Cue Lavellan's crisis! For someone aiming to make changes, he sure gets surprised every time it actually happens. Poor boy's been so used to failing.

Also, I just have so many feelings about how the elves have been treated throughout history. It's just so-- gutting. These are prominent figures who've changed the world, saved so many people, but then. Forgotten. And then you remember that's exactly what happened to Solas as well, but he's alive to see it happen which is just a double slap, and then i got to thinking about what he would do if the same thing happened to Lavellan and he just sees the world twist his lover's legacy-- ugH.

And this issue happens in real life too. Is still happening. Sometimes I wonder just how many forgotten people we unknowingly owe our thanks to. Sometimes I wonder who was erased just for the crime of existing.

Anyway, something to think about.

Also, more chapter sketches by Childish_Midget because I refuse to not shout my throat hoarse about it. Once again, those sketches have also been put up on the actual chapters:

Chapter [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)

Translation:

[1] **Ahn Fen'Harel esayal diana?:** What is Fen'Harel trying to stop?[\[1\]](#)

[2] **Alas'enes din:** The end of the world[\[1\]](#)

[3] **Ahn judin alas'en?:** What will end the world?[\[1\]](#)

From acerbic tongues

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

hearts and danger strung—

Lavellan paced in the library, dumped the stacks of books and tomes in his arms onto the table. Most of them had been borrowed from Morrigan since Dorian was right; their library catalogue *was* abysmal. He indeed had no need to know if Divine Galatea had taken a shit on Sunday.

Morrigan had squinted at him and his request for books, but Kieran had taken a shining to him, so that had improved Lavellan's standing in her eyes and she'd parted from her books without much heartache. Her scrutiny remained, though.

Lavellan muttered to himself as he dismissed several books. Where should he start looking?

Malice... The world would end from malice. But Elvish was a language of intentions so perhaps he mustn't take it so literally. What could it stand for? Another, hidden meaning?

"Daur," he whispered to himself, let the word settle, let himself wrap around the word, let it sink into him. Malice. It was also another word for—

He perked up.

Poison.

The world would end from poison. Red lyrium?

No, red lyrium was a by-product of the Blight. But what had caused the Blight in the first place, putting Chantry rhetoric aside? The Evanuris had wielded the Blight against the Titans, as he and Morrigan had discovered, but where did it originate from? Somewhere from the Void? Or somewhere else? Or had the Evanuris devised it themselves?

Solas shot him looks from the rotunda. Likely fed up with Lavellan wearing away at the floorboards with his pacing. That, or he was irritated that Lavellan was making good on his promise to get to the bottom of this, with or without Fen'Harel's help.

Footsteps soon ascended the stairs. Had Solas finally gotten sick of him?

"Research?" asked Solas behind him. The first thing he'd said to Lavellan in days. They hadn't spoken for a week, and Lavellan would blame busyness over avoidance, but he knew better.

Lavellan leaned over the table, eyes darting across the open pages and scattered papers.

"Am I being too loud?" he asked instead of answering.

Solas maintained a respectful distance as he inspected the research Lavellan had haphazardly scattered across the desk.

"I fear for the floor's varnish," said Solas. "What with all your shuffling."

"Can I help you with something?" Lavellan asked, fought to keep the snippiness away from his

tone, fought to remain composed.

He eyed Lavellan. "Have I done something to displease you?"

Yeah, you ass. If his displeasure could manifest, it would have throttled Solas. Instead, he raised a practiced brow and said, "I'd ask that of you, actually. You're the one who's been avoiding me."

His pause was too long. "I was not."

"You hesitated."

Solas face remained carefully aloof, looked as if he was regretting giving in and coming here, though that could just be his default expression. Regret here. Regret over there. Sprinkle in a sanctimonious complex and there you had the trademark Solas look.

"Nothing escapes you," Solas praised in that clipped tone of voice.

"If you have something to say, just say it. I've had my fill of deciphering intentions in Halamshiral. I'd rather not do it at home."

He stared at Lavellan. "You consider Skyhold... home?"

"I'm sure Fen'Harel is rolling in his annoyance at the notion, wherever he is," Lavellan said dryly, "but yes, Skyhold is home for me. Is that a problem?"

The aloofness cracked, revealing the hints of fondness beneath. Lavellan clenched his jaw.

"I am certain that the Dread Wolf wouldn't completely disapprove of the change in upholstery," said Solas.

A sharp huff of laughter left Lavellan. "There wasn't any upholstery when we came here. He'd better be thankful that Josephine Montilyet has impeccable taste."

"You once asked why Fen'Harel would allow the Inquisition to find his castle."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps he'd meant it as a gift."

Lavellan arranged the papers on the desk. "I would prefer the gift of truth," he mumbled beneath his breath, just soft enough that Solas could dismiss it as something Lavellan hadn't meant for him to hear.

Solas tensed imperceptibly.

Lavellan gave him a dazzling smile. "You wouldn't happen to know how the Evanuris won against the Earth, would you?"

Solas clasped his hands behind his back and looked away. "I have not witnessed it, unfortunately," he said. "Even the echoes wish for it to be forgotten."

Clever phrasing. Of course he hadn't witnessed it. He hadn't been counselling Mythral yet, but surely he still knew about it?

"Pity," was all Lavellan said.

“Fairbanks has made contact,” said Cullen. “He’s requesting for help against the Freeman.”

“The scouts we've stationed in the Graves have also mentioned sightings of Red Templars,” said Leliana. “And where the Red Templars are, red lyrium and its smugglers aren't far behind. Intercepting them will bring us a step closer to finding out where the Red Templars' main lyrium source is.”

“Speaking of,” said Lavellan. “How goes the situation at Emprise?”

Leliana frowned. “The scouts report of a mine guarded by Red Templars. We can’t get any closer without arousing suspicion, but I suspect it’s a red lyrium mine.”

Most definitely. “Where’s Hawke?” he asked.

“Still travelling with Sutherland’s company. Did you have something in mind?”

“I want to send her to Emprise and keep an eye on things. Snoop around.” He paused. “Remind her to be subtle, please.”

Leliana chuckled. “I can try.

“And about Florianne’s proposed plan, Inquisitor,” said Josephine, “are you willing to risk it?”

“I’m willing to dance,” he said. “If her plan goes well, we’ll have the names of those in Corypheus’ service.” He looked at Leliana. “But make sure not a single drop of our own is spilled. This was her gamble, and I didn’t spend all those hours stepping on people’s feet in Jo’s office just to be outdanced. If she gets caught by the Venatori, that’s on her.”

“I’ll send my agents to watch the runners,” she agreed.

“We’ve also received another letter from Dowager Mantillon,” said Josephine with a smile.

“Many dances today,” he mused. “What kind of dance is this one?”

She showed him her letter. “An allemande. If you dance gracefully, Inquisitor, we may just procure the Ylenn Basin property for ourselves.”

He smiled. “Ah, more of the Dales to be given back to me? How kind. Let’s dance with this comte she mentioned, shall we?”

“At once.”

Lavellan drummed his fingers on the table as they discussed other issues across Thedas.

“So then,” he said after, “looks like I’ll be returning to the Graves.” He couldn’t help but smile. How was Clan Venalin and Revasha?

“You look excited,” noted Leliana with a smile. “I hear you’ve procured a student among the Dalish.”

“She’s a very difficult student,” he sighed. “More liable to stomp on my foot than listen to me.”

Leliana chuckled. “Well, you need to be given grief every now and again.”

“Kind as always, Leliana.”

They sorted out the plan for the Emerald Graves and the other numerous operations they had across Thedas, then concluded the Council.

“Inquisitor, before you go,” said Josephine. “Dagna wishes to see you in the Undercroft. She mentioned a hook and glowing chains?”

He grinned.

“Should I ask?” said Dorian.

Lavellan fitted the hook and chain to his hip. The design was different this time, more streamlined, and much lighter. Smaller. Half the length of his forearm. He grinned at Dorian.

“A work of genius from Dagna,” he explained and grabbed the bladed hook, balanced for throwing, and threw it at a low-hanging branch. Prismatic chains shimmered in the sunlight, made of the same material as the axe that Briala’s people had found in the Crossroads. Lavellan had given that axe to Bull.

Lavellan played around with it for a bit, whooping as he swung across low-hanging branches. He collided with Blackwall, who had the misfortune of standing in the way. Lavellan went down cackling.

“I’m too old for this,” groaned Blackwall.

“Sorry!” he said and helped Blackwall up. Vivienne and Cassandra sent him berating looks, so he stopped messing about with a sheepish laugh.

“You are a child,” said Dorian with a chuckle.

“And your boss.”

Lavellan cleared his throat and composed himself as he gathered everybody’s attention, ignoring Dorian’s sniggering. They congregated at the table where a map of the Emerald Graves had been laid out.

“Fairbanks should be just ahead at Watcher’s Reach,” Lavellan said, pointing at the location. “And we’ve sighted Red Templars and red lyrium smugglers lurking about. We’ll split up into two groups.” He assigned everyone their tasks and group and went over the plans, and set out.

Lavellan’s group fought through a small band of Freeman on the way to Watcher’s Canyon. Fairbanks’ men allowed them passage upon arrival.

“So who is this Fairbanks fellow?” asked Dorian as they walked through the canyon. “He seems to have... appeared out of nowhere?”

“Desperate times sees the rise of people wanting to do good,” said Lavellan. Fairbanks’ integrity he would never question. He had a stalwart, compassionate heart, and a noble humility to him —

traits the world sorely lacked.

“Or those of unknown intentions, masquerading under the guise of assistance,” said Solas.

“Or both,” said Varric.

“He can be trusted,” said Lavellan with a surety that may have been too suspicious.

Solas scowled. “You seem so certain about the integrity of a man you have not yet met.”

Lavellan frowned at his tone.

“You and Fairbanks appear to be becoming fast friends,” said Solas.

“He’s very kind.” Lavellan held up the basket of food, smiling. “A gift. He says it was the least he could do and that he didn’t know how else to thank us. It’s rare to see someone so genuinely kind. The world is all the better for it.”

“You seem so certain about the integrity of a man you have not known for long.”

“You suspect he has ulterior motives?”

“You are the Inquisitor. Who would not wish for your favour?”

Lavellan stared at him. “That doesn’t answer my question. Truthfully, do you think he is someone to be wary of?”

Solas hesitated, the corner of his lips pulling slightly. Lavellan raised a brow. Oh my.

“Vhenan,” Lavellan said, grinning as he put the basket down, “are you jealous?”

“There is nothing to be jealous of.”

His grin only widened. “Uh huh.”

Solas turned and walked away and Lavellan laughed, grabbed his arm and tugged him close to press a quick kiss to his lips. Lavellan meant to pull back but Solas cupped the back of his neck and deepened the kiss. Not jealous his ass.

Lavellan hummed after and nodded gravely. “You’re right. That wasn’t the kiss of a jealous man at all.”

“Hush,” he said and kissed Lavellan again.

Lavellan’s lips twitched and he snorted to himself.

“What’s funny?” asked Bull.

“Nothing.”

Bull couldn’t prod further because Fairbanks met them at the end of the canyon with a polite smile.

“Inquisitor Lavellan, I take it?” he asked, Orlesian accent curling around his words.

“Yes. I’m guessing you’re Fairbanks?”

“Good guess.” They shared a firm handshake and Lavellan found himself smiling, comforted by

his presence. He was a good man. Gallant. "I trust you found your way alright?"

"Ran into a few Freeman."

He frowned. "They are getting closer, then. They've been content to stay further south, but as the month progressed, they've slowly made their way up north and targeted us. Now a few of my people have gone missing."

Fairbanks led them to the small sanctuary that they'd established in an elven ruin built into the canyon side. Orlesian refugees milled about, devastated from the civil war, making do with what they had. The place was packed.

"How many?" asked Lavellan.

"Just under two hundred. As you can imagine, it is difficult to protect such numbers."

Varric whistled. "Shit, this is almost as bad as the Hinterlands."

Fairbanks led them to a table with a map marking the Freeman's bases of operations and briefed them about the situation. By the time they'd finished their discussion, it was afternoon.

"We'll scout it out," Lavellan promised. "See what kind of numbers we'll need to hit them with. We'll work on getting your missing people today."

"Thank you, Inquisitor."

The five of them set out for the veridium mine. Some of the refugees had gone there to steal supplies, but they hadn't returned.

"So that was Fairbanks," said Dorian. "He does seem quite dependable. Has that air about him. What do you think, Varric?"

"Why me?"

"You're usually the one with insights on characters. Let's hear it."

Varric laughed. "Sparkler, I bullshit half the time with my own characters. Forget real people."

"I think he's an honest guy," said Bull. "People get this look in their eyes when they're scheming, and only experienced people can hide it. Either he's really good, or he's alright."

"His background is uncertain," Solas said and irritation plucked at Lavellan. "It isn't implausible to think that perhaps he falls in the experienced category."

"You know who else's background is uncertain?" Lavellan snapped without meaning to, and froze.

Solas stared at him.

"Literally almost all of you," he amended, inserting some levity into it to recover.

"He's got a point," Dorian said.

Varric laughed again. "Fair enough, Glow. Are you saying to give him a chance?"

"Yes," said Lavellan, taking the escape route and ignoring Solas. They continued through the forest, his companions chattering, but Lavellan was once again acutely aware of Solas' stare

burning the back of his neck.

He was almost glad to have reached their destination, and engaged the Freeman guarding the entrance in a melee. Easily taken care of.

“What is going on here?” came a new voice. A chevalier came out of the mine to investigate — Sister Costeau, he assumed — and she faltered at the sight of them and the fallen Freeman.

She fled back into the mine.

“Hey!” Lavellan gave chase.

“Inquisitor!” Solas called. “Wait—”

But Lavellan was already on her trail, descending into the tunnels, passing carts filled with large deposits of red lyrium. Lavellan hooked onto one of the carts and yanked. Its contents scattered in front of Costeau and blocked her path. She stopped.

Lavellan was gaining on her, daggers raised—

A cry and a flash was his only warning before a shield rammed into his side.

He went sprawling, daggers clattering ahead of him. Lavellan groaned and clutched at his ribs, his bones jarred, vision swimming.

He blinked up at his attackers, the torchlight flickering over their faces. Three Freeman with Sister Costeau. One of them threw her a sword and shield.

She rushed at him. The others leapt to action.

Lavellan darted away from her slash, her blade clanging as it hit the stone floor.

“This is the Inquisitor Lavellan they speak of?” she asked. He ducked another slash, danced away from the other two Freeman. “Not very impressive.”

Four of them. He could do it; he'd handled fifteen Venatori at once.

An arrow whistled past his ear.

You weren't caught off-guard then.

Lavellan clenched his fist. He opened a sunder above them and they cried, the force of the Fade pulling at them as he lunged for his daggers. Almost dropped one because of the electric pain racing up his arm.

Footsteps rushed into the mine. A prismatic glow approached.

“Mercy!” Bull cried, his axe glimmering in his hands.

“Take care of the Freeman,” said Lavellan, dropping into a stance. “Costeau is mine.”

“*Mahanon*,” Solas barked but Lavellan ignored him. He closed the sunder and charged at Costeau.

Solas' barrier sprung around him and deflected her strikes, but there was no need. Lavellan dodged her attacks easily enough. Her movements were predictable, typical of a chevalier, and Lavellan had had enough of chevaliers.

Her dominant foot shifted, body twisting, shoulders raising — precursors to a shield bash.

Lavellan leapt out of the way. It placed him in a perfect position behind her.

He slashed at the back of her knees.

It was a swift victory from there.

The rest of his companions eliminated the rest of the Freeman. Bull sheathed his axe, the prismatic blade vanishing with the press of a button, plunging them back into the mine's dimness. Only the eerie glow of the red lyrium and dancing torch fire lit the space.

Solas scowled at him, the flames on his staff vanishing. "Have you left your senses in Halamshiral?"

"What's got you mad now?" asked Lavellan, pitch rising in his incredulity.

"I told you to wait," he said, matching the rise in Lavellan's pitch. "You charged headlong into the opposition's territory without knowing the terrain. You were ambushed."

"It was hardly an ambush. Just caught by surprise."

He let out a sharp breath. "Is that meant to reassure me?"

Whatever argument brewing was thankfully cut short by someone crying out, "Is somebody there?" It came from deeper within the mine. "Please, help us!"

Lavellan sheathed his daggers and followed the cry, raised his hand and lit the way with the Anchor, its green glow flickering.

What had that outburst been about? If Solas' ire was stemming from worry, then he really needed to work on conveying it in a less combative manner.

Lavellan glanced at the Anchor.

You are dying, you know?

So much for worry.

Lavellan clenched his jaw. Still, Solas had known. All this time he'd known that the Anchor was slowly killing Lavellan and he still— He hadn't said *anything*. He— Had Lavellan ever really *mattered*? Had he been a brief distraction, a body to warm his bed, an interesting specimen from a 'broken' world? Had he ever fucking *meant anything*?

The Anchor flared, a brief burst of light.

"Whoa, shit," said Bull. The Anchor returned to a glow. "You good, Mercy?"

"Yeah," he muttered and reached a cavern housing a few supplies. There were cells at the very back.

"Over here!" the woman called out. A few more people were in the cell with her. Fairbanks' people.

"Are you Fairbanks' missing?" Lavellan asked. "We are the Inquisition. He has asked us to find you."

“I knew he wouldn’t forget us,” she sighed in relief. “There! The keys are hanging on the column near those crates!”

After freeing the grateful refugees, he sent them back with Bull and Solas as their escort and remained in the cavern to destroy the lyrium deposits and gather more information on the Freeman and their leaders.

Dorian cleared his throat as Lavellan was reading over the documents Varric had found.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

Lavellan folded the letter. “It *was* alright until Solas got pissy.”

Dorian frowned. “He was worried, I assume.”

“*Perhaps I will wait for you to die first so I will stand unopposed.*”

“Good for him,” said Lavellan, throat thick, and called Varric so that they could leave.

“Inquisitor, no!”

That was either Cassandra or Solas, but it was too late because Lavellan was already mid-air and plunging his daggers into the giant’s nape. The next series of events were a blur. It involved a rock, a loud roar, falling from a significant height, and his life flashing before his eyes for... what, the fourth time now? Fifth? Anyway, *that* didn’t matter. What mattered was that Lavellan was safe on the forest floor with about three barriers stacked over him and a dead giant by his feet.

His companions berated him during the whole walk back to camp.

If Lavellan thought the week had started off terribly, it somehow got worse. Specifically, *Solas* got worse, if that was possible.

At first, it had been disapproving looks after fights, and then he’d started pulling Lavellan back by the arm before he could charge at an enemy, and today, he’d messed with how they usually handled combat.

Lavellan and Cassandra had been in the middle of battling Duhaime the Venatori commander, a giant boulder of a man wielding a greataxe as if it were a twig, when Solas’ barrier surrounded Lavellan. Except, this was different. Lavellan liked Solas’ barriers because it didn’t sacrifice flexibility for durability. It moved with you. Accommodated you.

Yet this barrier was rigid, heavy. Lavellan stumbled and almost got his head lopped off.

Lavellan had no choice but to pull back and let Cassandra deal most of the damage lest he prematurely lose an arm.

Once he and Cassandra defeated Duhaime and the others had dealt with the rest of the Venatori, he rounded his murderous look on Solas.

“What,” seethed Lavellan as he marched up to him, “the hell was *that*?”

Solas stared back, unfazed. “Has ‘thank you’ been replaced?”

“Thank you?” Lavellan asked, incredulous. “*Thank you?* What the hell was with that barrier? Don’t experiment mid-combat!”

“Perhaps I would not feel the need to resort to such measures if you actually exercised more caution. You have been charging recklessly into battle lately.”

“I’ve been operating how I usually do.”

“Yes, and your usual operations involve a lack of self-preservation! You cannot keep throwing yourself at the enemy with the assurance that you’ll survive each encounter.”

“Are you doubting my abilities?” Lavellan asked, bristling. “Really? You’re going to start doubting *now?*”

I could kill you where you stand.

Lavellan didn’t say that.

“This was never about your prowess,” Solas threw back.

Vivienne cleared her throat pointedly, expression admonishing. “Now is not the time. Save your disputes for later in private.”

Lavellan let out an irate huff but he backed down. Vivienne was right. But—

“Don’t ever do that again,” he warned Solas. “Not mid-battle, not without communication.”

“And you are a beacon of excellent communication?” Solas asked.

“Enough,” Vivienne said.

They shot each other a final irritated look and separated.

Their interactions went even further downhill from there. Lavellan stopped taking Solas with him, assigned him to far-away tasks and braced himself for any complaints, but Solas said nothing about it, only went about the tasks diligently. But the moment they spent a second with each other, it was back to snarks and retorts and terse conversations that teetered into arguing.

The fact that they’d camped beside a Fen’Harel statue helped little.

Lavellan focused instead on taking care of the Freeman and most of the Red Templars, and helping the refugees move into Argon’s Lodge.

And collecting evidence about Fairbanks’ noble lineage.

He later approached Fairbanks, who was busy fixing one of the cabins that had been destroyed during the Inquisition’s seizing of the lodge. Fairbanks caught sight of him and started.

“Inquisitor!” he said and dropped the planks of wood he’d been carrying in surprise. He grimaced and chuckled as he picked them up. Lavellan helped him. “I apologise. I was— You startled me.”

Lavellan smiled. “Sorry.”

“Not a problem,” he said, smiling back. They set the planks down and Fairbanks dusted off his

hands.

Lavellan nodded at the cabin. “Do you need help? We did kind of destroy it. A little. Sorry.”

“No, no,” he insisted. “You have already done much for us, thank you. Again, I do not know how I can ever repay you.”

“You have no debt with us, Fairbanks.” Lavellan hesitated. “Though there is... something I want to discuss.”

He gestured at himself. “I am all ears. Although a little sweaty. Would you like me to change? Maker, I probably smell,” he muttered to himself.

“No,” he laughed, “it’s alright.” He reached into his coat and presented the midwife’s journal he’d found. Fairbanks took it, curious. “Clara had a few speculations about your lineage.”

Fairbanks stared at him, smile vanishing.

“And I have found the proof. But I have a suspicion that you already know about it.”

His jaw clenched, then he sighed. “She has good intentions,” said Fairbanks, “but this will not change anything. I have no wish to reclaim the name of a man who had shunned his daughter and murdered her lover. My mother deserved far better. The life of a noble is a gilded cage.”

Lavellan’s eyes saddened. “I know. And I am sorry about what you and your mother had to go through.”

“So you will let me keep this to myself?”

He pressed his lips together. “No.”

Fairbanks stared at him. “No,” he echoed.

“The nobility doesn’t care about the common folk, that much you well know,” said Lavellan. “But *you* do. If you reclaim your name, the Inquisition could help install you in court. From there you can have the means to help those your fellow nobility would not otherwise deign to help.”

His expression soured. “It is politics, Inquisitor. I may be of noble birth, but that does not mean I am noble-raised. I cannot navigate it.”

“We’ll help you. And you’re a charismatic man, I think you’ll be able to pull it off.”

A small smile pulled at his lips. “You think me charismatic?”

“Of course. I’m not blind.”

Fairbanks snorted, but his mirth faded as he eyed the midwife’s journal in his hand.

Briala could watch over the elves, Fairbanks could watch over the common folk, and Empress Celene would feel the Inquisition’s watchful eye breathing down her neck. It would make her behave for a while longer.

“Please, Fairbanks,” said Lavellan and clasped Fairbanks’ shoulder. Fairbanks looked back at him. “No one is looking after them. I wish I could, but I’m—” His expression twisted. “I’m just one man. I can’t watch over everyone.”

He gave a small smile. “You are certainly managing.”

Lavellan returned it. “I had help. And I would like to keep having his help. If needed, I could teach you how to navigate court myself, or get you in touch with instructors. I know how to make the Orlesians dance, and I can teach that song to you.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s not,” said Lavellan. “But it’s a start. You don’t have to be the man your grandfather was. You will not become him. You can take the name of Lemarque and make it into something better.”

Fairbanks looked away, watching the refugees within Argon’s Lodge.

“Please?” Lavellan asked. “For them? Consider it.”

“I—” He let out a short huff of laughter and glanced back at Lavellan, his smile wan. “Are these the words you have used against the nobility?”

Lavellan kept his gaze steady. “Maybe.”

Fairbanks sighed. “I will think on it, Inquisitor.”

“Thank you,” said Lavellan. He patted Fairbanks’ shoulder. “I’ll see you around. Are you sure you don’t need help with the cabin?”

“I’ll be fine.” He smiled and waved him off. “Go on. I am certain you have other matters to attend to. I need some time to myself.”

Lavellan nodded and bid him farewell, walking back to camp. It would be good if Fairbanks accepted. It would certainly keep Orlais in check.

There was nobody at camp yet. Lavellan scowled at the Fen’Harel statue once more.

Last time, he’d let Fairbanks keep it a secret, but what if this time—

The tones of the wooden wolves approached. Lavellan’s face soured further.

He turned. Solas had arrived, expression grim.

Ignore him, Lavellan told himself, and turned away.

“Fascinating,” said Solas. “You would have Briala for the elves and now Fairbanks for the common folk. How pleasing for you.”

Lavellan bristled and faced him again. “You were eavesdropping.”

“I merely overheard,” said Solas. “Such sweet compliments you gave. Such convincing words you said to manipulate him into being another piece that you can set in the heart of Orlais.”

“My sentiments were sincere, don’t insinuate otherwise.”

“But would I be mistaken?” he asked, tone mocking. “You wish to set about changing Orlais, and what better way to do so than by instating two figures who share your boundless and fatal idealism into Orlesian court?”

Boundless and fatal—

“What is your problem?” Lavellan snapped. “You’ve been like this the entire week. If I’ve done something to displease you, just spit it out instead of making snide asides.”

Solas stared at him coolly. “I have no quarrel with you. Do not try to start one for the sake of it.”

“Your actions suggest otherwise. I don’t read minds, Solas. If you have a problem with me—”

“Must my grievances always revolve around you?” he cut off. “I had not taken you for a narcissist, Inquisitor. Do you recall what sentiments you had made about losing yourself in your role? Have you forgotten so soon? Has leadership and power inflated your ego? Have you grown used to your extended reach already, come to think of yourself invincible? Does it gratify you to know that whatever you desire, you will attain?”

Lavellan stared at him, teeth grinding so hard that it echoed in his ears. “No quarrel with me, he says,” he repeated, voice low. “Go on, get it out of your system instead of stewing in your corner.”

“Oh, and you suddenly find it within yourself to listen, do you?”

“I’ve been listening!”

“Have you?” Solas asked. “Ah, yes, forgive me. I seem to see you have stopped heedlessly throwing yourself onto the path of reckless behaviour because you’ve deigned to *listen* to the loud concerns that the others have long been expressing. That you are listening to Fairbanks’ requests to remain separate from the perils of court. Such superb listening.”

Lavellan scowled. “I’m giving him time to think about it. I’m not going to coerce him.”

“But that is exactly what you are doing,” he snarled, voice growing into its impassioned volume. “It may not be forceful, but you are manipulating him into it; appealing to his empathy.”

“That isn’t true!”

“Oh, and you are the model of truth?” His grip tightened on the staff, eyes sparking. “You’ve become so embroiled in the causes you champion. You preach about helping others and yet you would gladly endanger them in the name of *your* greater good.”

Lavellan’s jaw almost dropped because look who was fucking talking!

“You blind others and encourage their foolish naiveté because you seem to be under the delusion that one man can change an empire overnight.”

“Well I did, didn’t I?” he challenged hotly. “One night was all it took.”

“To have Orlais eating out of your hands? Do you expect me to congratulate you for that?”

“You were certainly singing your praises that night.”

His face grew cold and grim. “Had I realised it would encourage your hubris, I would have refrained.”

“My *hubris*?” he nigh shrieked, shoulders rising, a hot flush constricting in his chest. He opened his mouth to argue but Solas cut him off once more.

“Disregard your own safety, ignore the pleas of those around you, throw yourself wholeheartedly into your causes. Go ahead and give the elves their homeland.” He sneered. “Burn yourself if you must, but I will not have you drag others into your wildfire.”

A short, hurt breath left him, the words having punched it out of his lungs. Lavellan pressed his lips into a tight, furious line, as if that would conceal how deep the words had buried.

“You and your clever little words,” Lavellan spat, slightly strangled. “Always know how to make it hurt just to prove your point.”

“And what point is that? That you’ve turned into a proud and arrogant man who has delusions that he’s helping by living to die?”

His breath stuttered, gaze falling on the wolf statue behind Solas.

“I cannot love a man who lives to die.”

Cold horror washed over him, gripped and held him rooted, doused the flames of his fury and left him shackled in its chill. They stared at one another in a dreadful, heavy silence. Lavellan’s expression had shifted from an aching sneer into a look that was steadily growing horrified. Solas took note of the shift.

“Have I hurt the Inquisitor’s feelings?” Solas questioned, the pitch of his voice gone soft yet bitingly cold. “Will I be struck down for insulting a living god?”

Something in Lavellan recoiled. “Enough,” he said, but the crack in his voice betrayed any pretences of appearing in control. “I’ve heard you. That’s enough. You’ve made your point.” Did he really— Was he really losing himself again? Was he really playing with lives again? Barrelling into his end goals with nary a care for the aftermath of his march’s relentless pace? Leaving others in the dust?

Solas’ stare bore into him.

He fixed Solas with a bitter, resigned look. “But never call me a living god ever again.”

Solas’ expression pulled even tighter. “Is that not how you’ve been acting?”

“What do you want to hear? ‘You’re right, Solas’? Is that what you want to hear?” Lavellan looked away with a twist to his lips. “You’re right, Solas. There. Does that make you feel better?”

“I did not set out to be proven right. And my sentiments hardly matter if you will forget them in a heartbeat.”

Lavellan laughed dryly. “You really think I can forget something like you calling me a living god in a heartbeat?”

“I do not think you will forget. I fear you will begin to treat it as a compliment.”

“Is there a point to you rubbing salt on an already oozing wound?”

“I have seen this countless of times,” said Solas. “Leaders who begin with noble intentions become perverted by their power and position without their realising. How long before you fall victim to it?”

Lavellan returned his cold stare. “Why are we still talking? You’ve long proven your point.”

Solas smiled mockingly. “Ah. Perhaps the transformation has already begun and I am witnessing its birth. So eager are you to run from the truth of your actions.”

Stop it, stop it! “Kill me then if I’m starting to turn so terrible.”

A vicious thrill of satisfaction coursed through Lavellan as Solas reeled from the comment. But he hardened and Lavellan's victory didn't last long.

"I need not do that when you throw yourself into the jaws of death every day."

Lavellan opened his mouth but no sound came out so he snapped it shut, clenched fists shaking by his sides, but he no longer knew which emotion had him trembling.

"Plant a tree if I manage it, then," Lavellan sneered instead.

Something like hurt flashed in Solas' eyes but Lavellan couldn't be certain and he didn't care. He didn't. Solas turned and walked away as he always did. Left Lavellan to stare at his back in fury. At least this was familiar territory — watching Solas leave while Lavellan's heart burned.

And once the force of his anger fell, Lavellan crawled into a tent and sat in the dim, Solas' words haunting him, sunlight barely peering through the tent's thick canvas.

He curled up atop the bedrolls, staring blankly.

Lavellan must have accidentally fallen asleep because he woke up in complete darkness, the soft chatter of his companions from outside drifting in. He pushed himself up and rubbed his eyes, feeling like shit.

"Hey, where's Mercy?" asked Bull from outside.

Nobody answered besides Solas, who icily said, "Perhaps endangering himself, as is his hobby nowadays."

Lavellan grumbled. Oh yeah, real endangering this was. Beware napping!

"We have to go find him," said Cassandra. "He could be in trouble."

"Surely not," said Solas. "He is clearly capable and untouchable. Let him rush into his foolhardy choices."

"Hey, whoa," said Varric. "I know you two are on bad terms at the moment but that's a little harsh, Chuckles."

Lavellan forced himself to stand.

"He never left," said Cole just as Lavellan snapped the tent flap open and startled his companions. He ignored Solas and called for Vergara in his mind. She swooped and perched on his shoulders.

"Do we have dinner?" asked Lavellan, raspy from sleep.

"Uh," said Varric, "we were going to have the leftovers from yesterday's rations."

"Prepare the pot. I'll get us a ram." He retrieved his bow from the table and smiled grimly at Solas. "But let's put his theory to the test. Am I untouchable? After all, he loves nothing more than being proven right."

Solas' shoulders hitched. "I will not have you hurt yourself just to prove a point!"

"Yet strangely, you would hurt me just to prove *yourself* right."

"Vishante kaffas," Dorian hissed. "What is going on with you two? This is getting out of hand."

"I agree," said Solas evenly. "Perhaps if it came from someone other than me, you will finally listen."

"I listened, you shit!" Lavellan snapped, at the end of his patience, worsened by the inertia from his nap. "You're the one who wouldn't leave it alone. I said I heard you. You could've stopped there but you just kept *going*. Was it a nice power trip? Did you feel more in control?"

Solas turned his head away, the firelight highlighting the irate edge in his eyes.

"Perhaps it is best if you get that ram, darling," said Vivienne, surprisingly gentle. "And to ease any... concerns, choose one or two of us to bring with you."

The name left his lips before he could think about it. "Cassandra."

That took Cassandra aback, but the surprise didn't last long. She grabbed her weapons and fell into place beside him with a small nod and no words needed. Lavellan swallowed the torn sob in his throat.

They headed into the forest in silence. Lavellan kept the Anchor at a steady glow. Soft enough to light their way but not so much that it would frighten the animals or garner unwanted attention. Vergala took flight to serve as surveillance.

"Is everything alright between you and Solas?" she asked once they were far away from camp, then grimaced, likely chiding herself for a poor question because it was obvious that the answer was no.

"Am I becoming ruthless?" he asked rather than answer. Talking to Cassandra had always been calming and objective. He trusted that she would deliver the hard truths without over or underplaying them.

Cassandra frowned at him. "Ruthless? No, I don't believe so."

"Careless?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation and he stopped walking, turned to her, the green glow of the Anchor casting them in angular shadows. But her eyes were sorrowful rather than angered. The expression punched him in the chest. It was the very same look she'd given him in the past.

Lavellan pushed those thoughts aside before he could think of the knife through her gut.

"But not the careless you think of," said Cassandra.

"What then?" he asked, hated how it sounded as if he was begging.

"You are not careless of others; you are careless with yourself." She sighed. "Perhaps Solas did not go about it commendably—" he snorted— "but the core of his sentiments, I suspect, stem from the same place as my concern. As everyone's concerns."

"And what are the concerns?" he asked.

"That you sacrifice your well-being." She frowned further. "I think we are doing good work under your leadership and direction, but it is worrying how little you seem to care about yourself."

His grip on the bow tightened.

"I worry that perhaps... That perhaps we have been remiss in showing you that you hold merit and

value on your own and that you do not have to help others to earn it. That you deserve respect on your own. As a person. Not as Inquisitor or Herald.”

Lavellan looked down, unable to meet the sincerity of her gaze and words. “Solas says the power and position of Inquisitor is getting to my head.”

“He is frightened.”

He blinked at the response and stared at her.

Cassandra shifted her weight from foot to foot. A nervous habit. “I cannot claim to know Solas, or even how his mind works, but this I can say with confidence: he cares for you, very much. As do we all. I think it frightens him that one day, in your bid to help others, you will forget to help yourself.” Cassandra shook her head. “And I fear the same. I fear that one day, you will neglect yourself so much that you give your life away. Prematurely. We do not want you taken from us early.”

His heart twisted. *And I didn't want you dying from my hand, but we don't always get what we want, do we?*

She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, her stare resolute. “I will not prevent you from aiding others because that is a part of you, but I pray that you realise you needn't give all of yourself away while doing so.”

It was silent after her declaration and admission, filled by the sounds of nocturnal creatures. Lavellan took a few steady breaths. Cassandra squeezed his shoulder.

“Please take better care of yourself,” she said. “You have much good left to do.”

“We don't get to choose when we die,” he said feebly.

“No,” she agreed. “But if I can presume to ask, live with us rather than die for us.”

Dorian had said the same thing, hadn't he?

A shaky laugh spilled from him and he hung his head. “I've forgotten how to do that,” he admitted wretchedly.

“Allow us to remind you.”

He looked up at her, at the steadfast conviction glinting like sparks on steel in her eyes, missing her more than he could bear.

“If I do turn out to be horrible—”

“You will not,” she said in a tone which brooked no arguments.

“You don't know that.”

“You will not,” she said again. As final as a mountain deciding a plot of land was as good a place as any to rest and plant itself down, immovable until the end of time. And Lavellan, helpless against such a strong faith, could only nod. “Do you believe it?”

“No,” he answered truthfully because that, at least, he could reveal to her. Lying to her was harder than lying to Solas.

That didn't deter her. She gave another firm nod. "Then we will help you see."

"A tall order," he said with a small smile.

She smiled back. "So was creating the Inquisition. Everything will fall into place."

Lavellan dearly hoped so. He tipped his head towards the direction where the new Argon's Lodge lay. "Come on, I want to pay Fairbanks a visit before we get some ram."

"How come?"

"I owe him an apology."

Chapter End Notes

cries my god, they got WORSE. They argue in such an unhealthy manner.
Communication who?

(Cassandraaaaa 🤔🤔)

Lavellan: I'm Mad and Sad so i'm going to sleep
You're a mood Lavellan.

Also, [eolenart drew a contrast of how Wicked Eyes ended](#) between the first and current timeline haha. Lavellan gets laid vs Lavellan gets problems. Thank you so much, mwah!

Their plea to stay

Chapter Notes

hoW BOUT THAT NEW DA4 TRAILER HUH???

tevinter looks great and then i remember it was built on the backs of slaves :)) would be a shame if... someone organised a slave uprising...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a call for reform—

Things between Lavellan and Solas turned from a spiking flare to a dull chill. Lavellan wasn't sure whether constant arguing was better than no speaking at all, wasn't sure which of them was being childish — or were they both being childish? — but they had to sort out whatever this was. But Lavellan let it be since they were still heated about it. Maybe they could have a constructive discussion later without someone immolating a tree.

“Inquisitor,” Scout Harding greeted.

Lavellan looked down from the tree he'd been perched on and smiled. A flower necklace was hanging around her neck, braided in a distinctly Dalish style.

“Scout Harding,” he returned. “I'm guessing visiting Clan Venalin went well?”

“I think the kids were happy to finally have someone who isn't that much taller than them.”

“Are they alright?” he asked and made his way down.

“They're fine. This grumpy-looking girl was looking for you.”

He landed and dusted off his hands, smiling. “What did she say?”

“Just asking when you'd come see them,” she said. “I told her you still had to deal with a few things. Do you know her?”

“I'm mentoring her,” he said. “Must be getting impatient. Did she look angry?”

“No, just very frowny. Like a *this is making me want to tear grass out* kind of frowny.”

“Maybe I can briefly visit for a day.”

Scout Harding opened her mouth to reply but Lavellan felt a presence behind him and he tensed, turned—

Something solid barrelled into him and the world tilted, spun, and he fell flat on his back with a yelp. The face hovering over him flashed a vicious, victorious grin.

“Ha!” crowed Revasha. “I got you! You didn't notice me.”

Lavellan smacked her braid out of his face. “Vasha? What are you doing here?”

“You were taking too long so I went and came myself,” she said as he got up and dusted himself off, pulling a few dry leaves from his hair with a grumble.

“Did you tell anyone you left?”

“I did,” she said.

Lavellan shot her an unimpressed look. “Did you tell them *where* you were going?”

“The forest.”

“[Da’vherassan](#)^[1], you *live* in a forest.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“This place is crawling with demons, Red Templars, Venatori, rogue Freeman, and who knows what else,” he scolded.

Her shoulders and expression tightened, her lips pressing, the victorious glimmer in her eyes dulling. She scuffed her foot on the floor. Lavellan recognised the look immediately. The very same look he'd worn when he was younger and had received chastisement instead of praise for a job well done.

Creators, he was turning into his old Warleader.

Lavellan reached out instead and patted her shoulder. “But other than possibly endangering yourself,” he said, “you’re right, I didn’t hear or notice you until the final second. Well done.”

That, at least, rekindled the pride in her eyes.

“How did you get here?” he asked.

Revasha nodded at Harding. “I followed her.”

His brows raised and he turned to Harding. “You didn’t notice her?”

Harding returned his bewildered look. “No!”

Lavellan regarded Revasha again. She couldn’t quite hide the proud puff of her chest this time and he laughed in slight disbelief.

“Impressive,” he said. “Well, you’re here now and you’ve gotten the drop on me. What’s next on your itinerary?”

“I know you’re too busy to continue lessons with me, so I thought I could learn on the field.”

He was back to frowning. “No.”

“I promise not to get in your way! I’ll stay hidden and provide support or back-up in case things go wrong.”

“Vasha, I’m going up against humans with augmented strength, genocidal mages, and the occasional hole in the Veil. I’m not letting you fight with us.”

Her shoulders rose. “This is my home too and I want to help protect it.”

“And the Inquisition won’t be here forever, so yes, you’re going to have to protect it when we’re gone,” he fired back. “You need to be alive to do that.”

“I can’t learn how to protect it if you won’t let me!”

“There are better ways to learn.”

“You said yourself the best way to learn was through experience.”

“Actually, I said the best way to learn was through teaching.”

“I can argue with you all day, hahren.”

“So can I. I’m quite skilled at it. I have very argumentative company.” *Ever argued with the Dread Wolf? Not recommended. It goes in circles and somebody ends up crying, usually me.*

“How about—” Harding interrupted cheerily— “she practices sneaking about while following you around and watching you fight? She’ll be out of harm’s way, she can practice prowling, and because she’s so good at it, the enemy won’t even see her.”

Revasha grinned. “Sounds great.”

“I think you’re getting too smug for someone who doesn’t even have their vallaslin yet,” he said.

She sniffed. “I’ll get it in a week after my First Hunt.”

Her First Hunt? Then that meant... it was her birthday soon. Was that why she’d asked if he would return within two months?

He slowly grinned. Hers faded in the light of it.

“Vasha... did you want me to return soon because you wanted me here for your birthday?”

“What? No, I just wanted you to teach me more useful things before my First— Stop smiling!”

Lavellan walked around the Inquisition encampment delivering tasks and overseeing operations and turned it into a lesson. Revasha stuck close, listening, but wary around so many non-elvens.

He hadn’t realised how much actually went into leading. How much he’d managed to learn.

“This is a lot,” Revasha said, face scrunching in concentration.

“It is,” he admitted. “And I’m not expecting you to learn it all now. Learning to lead takes time.”

Later, after he’d helped the refugees with menial tasks, Revasha asked, “Why do you help the shems? The moment things go sour, they’ll turn on us.”

“Because they need help,” he said.

She pursed her lips and looked away, face souring, hands clenching. He eyed her but said nothing.

Once the scouts sighted Red Templars over the hill, Lavellan took Sera, Dorian, and Cassandra with him. Revasha slipped away and disappeared. He called for Vergala.

“Keep her out of trouble,” he said and she cawed in response, flew off again.

“So who’s the scrunchy one?” asked Sera.

“My student,” he said. “She wanted to tag along and watch us fight so she can learn.”

“Let her then,” said Sera. “Long as her bucket doesn’t get kicked.”

“I’d rather not let her,” he said. “She’s too young.”

“What, I was running with the Friends that age. Age hasn’t got nut over nobs with breeches to their ears. Or wanting food. Alleys don’t give a rat’s arse about it.”

Lavellan paused, stared at her.

Sera frowned. “What?”

Before she could duck, he hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her close and crushed her in a hug. Her bony elbows dug into him in her surprise.

“Wha— Let go, you tit!”

He only hugged her tighter. “It must have been very hard,” he whispered, and her struggles faltered. “You’re very strong.” Lavellan pulled away before she could get uncomfortable. She pulled a face.

“Don’t drip sap on me now,” she said. “I’m fine.” But her voice was slightly thick.

“Just stating a fact,” he said. She hadn’t had an easy life, and it was something rarely acknowledged, even by her.

“I wanted those stupid wheelie horses and almost got my hand lopped for taking it. Wasn’t food, but it was pretty.”

Sera broke the cookie in half and offered it to him. She’d gotten so much better at baking and she’d give what she’d made to hungry, wandering orphans who had nobody to miss them. She’d become the person she’d most wanted to see when she’d been that same hungry, wandering orphan.

“Wanted food and toys, and get to laugh and have time with it,” she said. “But no. I get to laugh because time isn’t with it and all I got were bones and an angry belly.”

She shoved the cookie in her mouth and he opened his arm, let her settle beside him. He wrapped his arm around her while she pulled her knees up and laid her head on his chest.

“Got taken in by that Lady I told you about,” she said while chewing. “But she made me hate me because what, I got long ears? Big eyes? Then I hate others like that because I’m the wrong kind.”

“You’re not,” he murmured.

“I’ve been an arse.”

“You were scared.”

She snorted. "Everyone's scared."

He gave her his half of the cookie. She broke it in half again and gave him the quarter, refusing to eat until he did.

"I wanted to be golden, you know?" she asked. "Not bones in a rag. Wanted a place but I got nowhere." Her voice turned strangled and she buried her face in his chest, but she pushed on. "Piss, it wasn't fair!"

"It wasn't," he agreed and pulled her closer as if she was that young, bony, hungry orphan who was told she had no place again so he could tell her, "Yes, yes you do. I'll make sure of it."

"Wish I got somewhere," she said.

Her shoulders shook and he held her tighter. His prosthetic was off so he couldn't do a full hug, but he tried. She recognised what he was trying to do and repositioned herself so that she could wrap her arms around his torso and tuck her head just beneath his chin.

"Wish they made me feel somewhere, gave me something. I got nothing instead." Her voice thickened. "Would have turned into nothing and no one would know because who cares about bones? So I yelled. Real arse about it too. Least I was an arse and not nothing."

She was crying now. Lavellan ran gentle fingers through her hair.

"You're not nothing," he said.

Her sobs grew in volume and she gripped the material of his tunic.

"Now I got ugly sobs," she said through the warble of her voice. "And you get ugly sob."

"It's fine," he soothed. "You can mourn that your childhood was stolen. It's alright." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm here."

Her weeping turned furious and she screamed into his chest and he held her through it.

Eventually, her cries dwindled into sniffing, then silence. The bout of crying had sapped her energy, so she stayed quiet against him, his fingers combing through her hair.

"You're here?" she asked, voice small.

"I'm here."

"Don't let him take you away," she pleaded. "Stay."

To that, he said nothing.

Lavellan pursed his lips at the memory. I'm sorry, Sera. I couldn't stay.

He looked back at her over his shoulder, giggling at something Dorian had said while Cassandra's expression soured at whatever it had been.

"Live with us," Cassandra and Dorian had said.

He hadn't been able to stay, but Asunara had taken him back and maybe, this time, he should work to stay.

Lavellan stared at his marked hand. This was still killing him, though. He was on borrowed time. *Could* he stay? He wasn't sure what was happening with Solas anymore, wasn't sure what the future was holding anymore, but if Solas still wanted to press on ahead, then Lavellan would ask him to take the Anchor before leaving. His arm be damned.

They made their way across the forest to where the Red Templars had been spotted, Vergala soaring the skies in surveillance. Revasha made her way across the trees. Hidden for the most part.

Vergala cawed twice above them. The sound of rumbling wheels and clank of armour followed.

Lavellan signalled his team into position and hid behind the large trees, waiting.

Two seconds passed.

Three.

The Red Templars came into view, escorting carts of red lyrium.

"Now!" said Lavellan and they leapt out of hiding. The element of surprise gave them the upper hand as they ripped through the small group.

A rebellious arrow zipped past him and nailed the Red Templar he'd been fighting right in their visor slit. The Red Templar fell. He glared up at the trees.

"Vasha!" he scolded.

Sera blew a raspberry and waved her hand at his face. He sputtered and smacked it away.

"Good shot scrunchy!" she yelled.

"Don't encourage her."

"What, good shot innit?"

He grumbled. It *was* a good shot.

After the fight, Lavellan retrieved the smuggler letters in the Templars' pockets while Cassandra shattered the lyrium deposits in the cart and nodded in satisfaction.

It was dusk by the time they returned to the Inquisition camps. Revasha descended the trees and dashed towards Sera.

"How did you do that thing?" she asked, barely holding back the excitement in her tone, and Sera jumped in alarm.

"Do what?" she asked.

"The thing! When you jumped back and flipped and shot mid-air upside down."

"Oh that? Pft, it's easy."

Lavellan sighed. "No, it's not."

"Can you teach me?" asked Revasha.

"Uh," said Sera. "Never taught before. You just... bump your feet and twist a bit and nail a few

wigs.”

“What?” asked Dorian.

She threw her hands up. “I don’t teach!”

Revasha frowned at the ground and Sera rubbed the back of her neck, considering her.

“Why?” she asked. “You got Quisitree over there teaching you how to scare people’s pisspots off their arses.”

“He doesn’t do cool things.”

“Excuse you,” Lavellan said, affronted. “I do cool things!”

Sera shrugged. “Don’t teach, end that. I’m hungry, where’s food?” And off she went.

Revasha stared down, dejected.

“Now, now, don’t feel too bad,” said Dorian. “That’s just Sera. In any case, you’re still in capable hands.”

“He’s busy half the time,” she muttered, her eyes were faraway. The sentiment behind her words may have been more personal than she preferred to let on. “I need to learn in other places too.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” asked Dorian.

“Because my parents are dead and none of us are strong enough to defend the clan,” she snapped, then clammed right back up after the outburst. Dorian stared wide-eyed. Lavellan pursed his lips. She sharply turned on her heel and walked off. “I’ll see you tomorrow, hahren,” she said.

“Wait,” he said. “I’m not letting you walk alone.”

“You’re busy—”

“The Inquisition can survive for a few hours without me.” He handed Cassandra and Dorian the smuggler letters. “Get these sent to Commander Cullen and ask Varric to check in on Hawke and determine the situation in Emprise.”

“At once,” said Cassandra.

“Be back at a reasonable time,” said Dorian.

“Yes mother,” he snorted. “Come on, Vasha. Let’s get you home.”

She faltered, but walked beside him when it became evident that he wasn’t joking.

They passed Inquisition soldiers who saluted him on the way, and she stuck close to him again, still unused to so many eyes following her, but that was the problem with being associated with him. Especially since she was his student.

“Sorry,” he said after they were past the Inquisition encampment. “The attention gets uncomfortable, I know.”

“All those shems looking at you,” she said, rubbing her arms. “But they bow to you. Must feel good.”

“Doesn’t,” he said.

“After everything they’ve done?” she hissed. “Come on! Now they have to listen to a Dalish. Tell me that doesn’t feel good.”

“It doesn’t feel good,” he said again. She rounded her disbelieving look on him.

“Not even a little bit?”

“It never lasts long.” Soon, all he’d felt was the responsibility, the weight of lives. They’d taken pieces of him and had shaped him into something that he wasn’t until some days he’d been unable to recognise himself and he’d wondered if he even had a self.

“Don’t you hate them?”

“Maybe once, but it just hurts holding onto it. Spirits aren’t the only ones who can be twisted by strong emotions.”

“How can you say that?” she asked, hands clenching by her sides. “They tried to erase and destroy us. They took the Dales from us!” Her voice rose in pitch. “They gave it to us and then said, ‘Actually, fuck you,’ and then they killed us! And they’re still killing us and we have to keep moving just to stay alive, but I’m tired of moving. Why should we be the ones who have to move? It’s not fair!”

She stopped walking and so did he. His heart twisted in his chest at the pain in her voice, her outcry echoing the one within every Dalish child’s heart. It was the same outcry he’d had when he was younger.

It’s not fair, why us?

Sometimes, the outcries would return. Faded, but still there. Still crying.

“It isn’t,” he agreed softly. “And I won’t deny you your anger. You have every right to be. The world is unkind and all it seems to do is take and make monsters.” He placed a firm hand on her shoulder. “So don’t let it make you into one.”

Her brows pulled, mouth pursing, eyes shimmering.

He pulled her close into a side hug. “I’m sorry about your parents. I’m sorry about the friends and loved ones you had to witness die. Be angry and grieve; it’s an injustice.” She shook beside him and he pretended not to see her tears. “But don’t be another monster.”

“I miss mae and bae,” she whispered.

“I know.” His tone softened and he gave her a proper hug. “It hurts, I know.”

“They tell me to pray for them. That Falon’Din will guide them to a better place.” She gripped his coat. “But I don’t want them in a fucking better place. I want them here. I miss mae braiding my hair and I miss bae’s awful sense of humour and I miss when they both danced and I’m sorry for ever thinking they were embarrassing. I just want them back.” She was crying now, struggling to get the words through.

Her bow and quiver dug into his arms as he hugged her tighter.

She was too young. He stared at the silhouettes of the trees as twilight plunged the forest into

darkness, recalling Ellana crying in his arms, wailing, “Mae, mae, come back.”

He’d been twelve, Ellana ten. Four and two when their father had died.

Revasha’s weeping eventually ceased and she pulled back. He offered her a cloth that she gingerly took.

“Let’s get you home,” he whispered.

Revasha, drained of energy, could only nod and stay close to him as they walked back.

Lavellan surreptitiously wiped away the tears on his cheeks.

Revasha returned the next morning with a request from Keeper Hawen. Lavellan accepted the letter and ruffled her hair with a soft smile as a silent question. *How are you feeling?* She huffed and whacked his hand away. *Fine. Stop nagging.*

“We don’t know where they went,” she said. “And the Keeper can’t dedicate enough people to look for them.”

Their First, Taven, had taken a retinue of hunters with him in search of an elven ruin. They were the only experienced hunters left of Clan Venalin after the unfortunate skirmish with human raiders which had wiped out most of their other hunters, including Revasha’s parents.

Revasha bit her lip. “They’re the last of our experienced hunters. If they’re dead—”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” he said. “Some ruins may have collapsed entrances or rubble and it would take some time to clear out if they’re only a small group.”

“Some ruins are also full of traps.”

“I guess we’ll see.” He whistled for Vergala which was needless since she came whenever he wished, but he’d rather not give everyone reason to keep believing Varric’s tale of Lavellan being an Elvhen prince.

She came at the call and perched on his arm.

“Hello clever girl,” he said. “Scout the Graves for me, will you? We’re looking for an elven ruin and Dalish hunters near it.”

She cawed and took off.

“Now then,” he said, “I don’t have much to attend to today. I want to see whether you’ve fixed that godawful elbow.”

“You’re on.”

They sparred for most of that morning until Vergala returned past noon. Lavellan bid her to ask some of his companions to gear up, and his face soured once he dropped Solas’ name. Lavellan had to take him though. The rest that Lavellan chose were the ones Solas seemed closest with in the inner circle: Cole, Bull, and Cassandra.

Some part of him was pleased that Solas seemed to be making friends outside of spirits and Lavellan, but also, Lavellan chose those three for the express purpose of putting a barrier between himself and Solas.

He finished gearing up and stepped outside his tent, his companions ready and waiting.

“I’m coming.”

Lavellan heaved an almighty sigh and faced Revasha.

“You know what ruins tend to have?” he asked. “Demons and undead.”

“I won’t get in the way. You said the other day I was improving.”

“Da’vherassan—”

“Hahren, please.”

“No.”

“How am I supposed to watch over the Dales when you won’t let me see the danger in it?”

“I said nothing about watching over the Dales. You’re one person, you can’t possibly guard the entire area. You need to watch over your clan, and again, you can’t do that if you die. I don’t want to have to bury you, Vasha.”

Solas was giving him a look. He could feel it.

“And I can’t watch over them if I don’t know what I’m protecting them from.”

“Mamae said not yet,” said Cole, voice low, “too young, not yet, when you’re older. I’m older and there’s blood on my lips and soil under my nails. She’s not here to tell me that I’m older now. They keep telling me to wait.” He peered up from beneath the brim of his hat. “Waiting to waste away? Let me roar.”

Revasha frowned at Cole.

“Alright,” Bull said with a nervous chuckle and pulled Cole’s hat over his face. Cole stared up at Bull but the hat was still over his face and Lavellan wasn’t sure if the scene looked comical or creepy. Bull decided creepy. “He does that. Don’t mind him.”

She cast them an uneasy look before returning her attention to Lavellan.

“This is my home,” continued Revasha. “I want to find the rest of my family.”

Lavellan stared at her, at the resolute fire in her eyes.

“They call me Warleader and I grip the bow tight, the old Warleader buried and bruised,” said Cole, muffled from the hat. “I will protect them. This is my family.”

Lavellan sighed. “Yes, thank you, Cole.” He crossed his arms. “Fine. Come with us, but the moment things go sour, do as before. I suspect you’ll follow us anyway. This way, I can at least keep an eye on you.”

Revasha’s face brightened and she hugged him, and Lavellan forgot to hug her back in his surprise. Not that she hugged him for long anyway.

“Let’s go!” she said, racing ahead.

“Is this wise?” asked Solas.

“At this point, Solas,” said Lavellan, “wisdom is now a spectrum instead of a binary. Let’s get moving.”

Maybe Taven and the hunters had cleared the site and it was already safe and there was nothing to worry about. Revasha was impressive for her age, yes, but that meant little when faced with demons. Lavellan was used to them, but even he struggled some days.

They followed Vergala further north, passing the trees planted for the Emerald Knights, until they spied the crumbled remnants of what was once a mighty bastion. Something in him knew that this could only be the work of Elgar’nan.

Elgar’nan. An unexpectedly sharp emotion flared within him.

“Did you hear about Lord Elgar’nan and...” Asunara falters.

I pause my reading and look at her over the sheafs of paper in my hand.

“Impulsive,” I say. “Breaking his badge of office and throwing it at the All-Father.” I put the papers down. “Though not entirely out of character.”

I’ve long known that the Wolf is an explosion waiting to happen, and explode he has certainly done. I can’t say I’m surprised. He never does things halfway.

Asunara crosses her arms. “The All-Father burned the soldiers,” she murmurs. “Because of the Wolf’s actions.”

“Because of their loyalty,” I correct. “Because they have refused to disavow him. But the blame has been pinned on the Wolf to make him feel guilty. Pain is a very compelling method to break someone. Elgar’nan has inflicted physical pain upon the soldiers... and a deeper kind in the Wolf.”

Asunara’s aura shimmers, malcontent. It’s rare for her to be so brazen about her emotions, but I can’t berate her for it.

After all, my aura is a mirror of hers.

“I think,” I say and steeple my fingers, “that if the All-Father were to burn my soldiers... Well, I think I would be very tempted to kill him.”

He jolted back into the present and he rubbed his eyes.

“Look,” cried Revasha. “It’s our aravel!”

Sure enough, just beyond the trees peered the red sails of Clan Venalin. Lavellan cleared his head and swallowed the anger as they approached the aravel, but that anger crawled back up his throat at the sight that greeted them.

For past the aravel, just before the large doors into the bastion, lay several elfin bodies charred

beyond recognition.

“Oh shit,” murmured Bull.

Revasha took a hesitant step forward, but stopped, staring wide-eyed. Lavellan’s mouth twisted and he almost pulled her back to cover her eyes, but he stopped himself. She’d hate that.

Bull examined the bodies. “Unarmed, and they don’t even have defensive wounds. Taken by surprise.”

Solas read the ambient magic and frowned. “Tevinter magic. Venatori.”

Lavellan’s expression darkened, but he shook it off. That wasn’t important right now. He turned to Revasha who’d remained rooted to the spot, couldn’t take her eyes off the corpses, so Lavellan stepped in front of her and blocked her line of sight. She stared up at him with frightened eyes.

“Breathe,” he reminded gently.

“That’s what you’re worried about?” she snapped.

“I’m worried about *you*,” he said, undeterred. “You’re not breathing.” It took a while of coaxing, but she eventually matched the pace of his breaths.

Lavellan hugged her as she trembled, wished he could throw a blanket over her and take her far away from this wretched—

“Our hunters,” she whispered. “They’re gone. Our First— Taven was an idiot but he was—” Her voice cracked and she gripped her bow tighter. “We’re not old enough,” she said. “Half of us aren’t ready to be hunters, but without hunters, we’re doomed. Nobody’s old enough to be Warleader, and the other hunters are too old—”

“It’s alright,” he soothed. “One problem at a time.”

She gripped his coat. “I can’t be Warleader, hahren. I can’t do it. But the other hunters are too old or young or dead. The others can still hunt for food and we can get by but they’re not fighters. We have children—”

“Vasha,” he soothed, “you’re going to be alright.”

“No we’re not!”

“You will be. The old hunters don’t have to fight, but you can still learn from them.” He stepped back and placed both his hands on her shoulders, fixed her with a resolute look. “And I’m here, I’ll teach you all I can. I can buy you time and ensure the area is safe and protected by the Inquisition. There are workarounds.”

“I’m going to kill whoever did this,” she promised.

“These are mages, Vasha. I can’t let you fight them.”

“Please, hahren,” she pleaded.

Lavellan faltered. He didn’t know why, but he looked to Solas for help. But maybe he did know why. It was always Solas who he had turned to for counsel when faced with difficult decisions.

“No,” said Solas, before his expression softened. “But perhaps she can deliver the finishing blow

after you've weakened the enemy."

He faced Revasha. "There. No butchering either. Make it clean and swift."

"But— After they've done this?" she hissed and gestured at the burnt bodies. The smell was awful. Rounded and jagged, invaded every space.

["Vir Tanadhal, Vir Assan?"](#)^[2] he asked.

She looked down. "Be swift and silent. Strike true and never waver."

"Never let prey suffer," they finished together.

To that, Revasha stayed quiet and Lavellan wished he was better at this, better at consolation, better with choosing the correct words to ease her.

Lavellan stared at the bodies. "We'll tell Keeper Hawen after, find out what he'd like to do. Is that alright?"

Revasha nodded wordlessly.

"Okay," said Lavellan softly. "In the meantime, maybe we can put up wards so the bodies aren't disturbed."

She nodded again. Solas raised his hands and brought them down, a curtain of his magic shimmering and descending upon the area. With that sorted, they entered the bastion, greeted by an arcade of arches along the wall, each housing twin statues of golden, howling wolves. Lavellan placed his hand upon one of the nearby wolves.

"Well-preserved as always," he murmured. He caught Solas staring through the reflection on the surface, but when he turned, Solas was already looking away.

They encountered the Venatori not that long after and they jumped right into it. Lavellan kept an eye out for Revasha at first, made sure she was away from the fighting, but Bull was guarding her so Lavellan relaxed and focused on his enemies instead.

He was about to deliver the finishing blow on the spellbinder, but Revasha barrelled into the binder with a war cry, daggers flashing overhead.

"Vasha!"

She plunged her daggers into the spellbinder over and over, screaming as she did, sent blood spattering.

"Enough!" bid Lavellan but she didn't listen. He sheathed his daggers and slipped his arms beneath hers, dragged her away. "That's enough."

"Let me go!" she cried. "It's not enough!"

"He's *dead*," Lavellan said. "That's enough."

He let her go and she whirled on him, gnashing her teeth. "No, it's not! It doesn't— *feel* enough. It's not satisfying at all!"

Lavellan's expression softened as he eased her daggers away and set them down. "That's it," he said. "It doesn't. It rarely does."

Not the answer she wanted to hear. Her expression twisted and she trembled, face paling. Lavellan recognised the look once her mouth pulled and he stepped aside. She turned away and vomited over the stones. Her grieving sobs mixed with the visceral sounds and all Lavellan could do was hold her hair back and rub her back soothingly.

Gods, he was an *idiot*. Why had he allowed her to come? He should have been more adamant, should have put his foot down, instead of exposing her to this kind of danger and distress.

Lavellan offered her his waterskin after so she could rehydrate and wash the taste of sick from her mouth. He guided her towards a collapsed wall and sat her down, facing away from the dead bodies.

“Cloth?” he asked his companions. Solas unslung the pack he always carried and pulled out a clean cloth which he wetted with his own waterskin before handing it to Lavellan.

“Here,” Lavellan said gently and held Revasha close as he carefully wiped the blood off her neck and face.

She gripped his coat, still shaking.

“I think it’s best if you stay here,” he said after he finished. Lavellan rinsed the cloth, wrung it, and returned it to Solas with a grateful nod.

Revasha shook her head. “No,” she croaked. “I’m going with you.”

“Good!” he chirped. “Because I’m staying here.”

“But—”

“You are shaken,” he said softly. “You need to recover and rest.” He turned to his companions. “You go on ahead. See why the Venatori were digging.”

Solas held up a fragment of a seal. “I believe the Venatori were hunting this down. The Emerald Seal, they called it.”

“Good start.” He whistled for Vergala and let her perch on his waiting arm. “If you’re in danger, send her back.” Vergala cawed and perched on Cole’s shoulders. “Go on. We’ll be here.”

The four of them continued, but Cole lingered, fidgeting, attuned to Revasha’s distress. But he shook his head and smiled at Lavellan before following the others.

Quiet hovered around them like a heavy veil.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, breaking the silence. “That was your first kill, wasn’t it?”

She nodded, plastered against his side as if a breeze would rip her away if she let him go. “That was pathetic,” she muttered. “I’m so stupid—”

“No,” he said. “You’re not. Taking a life is a heavy thing to bear, enemy or not. I shouldn’t have —” No. No time for his shortcomings, he’d berate himself later. Right now, the main concern was making sure Revasha was alright. “How are you feeling? Do you need water?”

“I’m fine,” she mumbled. “I thought it’d feel nice. Or... I don’t know, *better*. But they just died. Like that. They didn’t suffer. It wasn’t satisfying at all.”

“No,” he agreed. “But are you going to keep going until you feel satisfied?”

She didn't answer. He sighed.

"Vasha, anger is powerful. Anger tells you that you've been wronged, anger gives you strength. But anger and vengeance twist you if you let them stay too long."

Disjointed sensations and memories of overpowering and blinding rage flickered through him and he lowered his gaze in shame.

"But they killed Taven! And Eri and Aisha and Raenathe and—" Her breathing hitched again and she struggled with her words. Lavellan pulled her closer and held her securely, let her hide her face into his chest.

"I know," he murmured. "And you've killed those responsible. Let the fact that they can't go on hurting and killing others again be enough."

Her grip tightened on his coat but she stayed quiet and he let her, held her until her shaking eased, until her grip loosened somewhat and she breathed deeper.

"You barely flinch when you kill," she said, subdued, "but I'm still here shaking."

"We're fighting in a war," he said. "War makes a mess of things. We've gotten used to taking life, understand its necessity, but I always try to respect their deaths and I don't butcher. But I hope you will never have to put up with that."

"I'll have to again, at some point," she said. "I'm a hunter. I have a duty to protect and provide for the others."

"I know," he murmured. "But if that time comes, I hope you keep in mind what I said. Follow the Vir Tanadhal."

A balmy breeze swept past and rustled the leaves, breathed into the Graves. Revasha's shaking stopped but she didn't let go and they stayed there.

"What was your first kill like?" she asked.

He hummed. "Raiders got too close to the clan. I managed to kill three. After making sure my hunters and the others weren't hurt, I went into the forest to vomit."

"That's why you moved away so fast," she said, laughing weakly. "You knew I was about to hurl."

He smiled, rubbed her back comfortingly.

It was quiet for another few moments before she pulled away, looking down at her hands on her lap.

"I'm sorry I called you Harellan before," she said. "You were just... frightening."

He stared. She couldn't meet his gaze.

"Yet you still approached me."

"I wanted to prove to myself that I'm brave enough to."

Lavellan chuckled. "Ah, so I was the scary monster that the children dared each other to approach."

“You laugh but that’s exactly what happened. One of my friends called me chicken. Should’ve seen the look on his face when I said you were going to teach me.” She wrung her fingers. “It’s just — You were like us, but you weren’t. We were scared you’d forgotten what it was like to be Dalish. We were scared you would turn on us. You come leading this group that say you’re the prophet of *their* god. You lead the same group of people who’ve been trying to erase us for so long.”

“I never asked to lead them,” he murmured.

“Do you wish you weren’t their leader?”

“Most times,” he said and looked away. “But I’m still Dalish. I haven’t forgotten.”

“We know that now. And you’re still kind of weird, but I think that’s just you.”

“Hey!”

“You are,” she said and managed a weak laugh. “You’re so weird. But... thanks. For teaching me and being nice to me. Sorry I was such an ass to you.”

Her mood wasn’t lifted, not really, but she was no longer shaking and that was a start.

“Got any ideas on how I can look less frightening?” he asked.

“I don’t think you can. It’s just your face. Put a bag over it?”

“Draw a happy face on the bag.”

She nodded. “Put some flowers on top.”

“I’ll take it up with my requisition officers,” he said gravely. “It’s for the greater good.”

Revasha snorted, then laughed, and the sound was less heavy. Lavellan smiled.

His companions eventually returned, battle-worn.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Demons,” grunted Bull. “A fuckload of them.”

Solas passed Lavellan a scroll and paper rubbings of plaques. “An account of the event which catalysed the Exalted March. It seems these ruins are the final resting place of the Emerald Knights. The Din’an Hanin.” Lavellan unrolled the scroll and read the true accounts.

It was a mess. A story of betrayal and lost love.

Revasha took it gingerly from him and he almost snatched it away, almost covered her eyes, but that would be a disservice. She deserved to see it, read the truth. He couldn’t shelter her. He mustn’t. In another world, a safer world, maybe he could have done that, but not in this world.

“We betrayed kin,” she said, eyes wide, before something sombre and grave darkened it. Made her look far older. “So, they weren’t really heroes,” she muttered.

Something wrenched in Lavellan’s chest.

“Perhaps,” said Solas and Lavellan frowned at him. “The Chantry call them butchers, the Dalish

view them as romantic heroes. However, there is always a semblance of truth to accusations.” He tilted his head and Revasha gave him a quizzical look. “Perhaps they weren’t the faultless, gleaming heroes that you were led to believe, but they still defended the Dales. War and conflict rarely have neatly cut lines. Whatever the case, they attempted to stand for the elves. Know that they tried. *That*, I suppose, is something you may take comfort in.”

Lavellan blinked at him, eyes wide, but Solas wouldn’t look at him.

Revasha frowned to herself, before she returned the scroll to Lavellan.

“We’ll give this to the Dalish,” said Lavellan. “It’s uncomfortable, but it’s important.” Vergala perched on Lavellan’s shoulders as he stood. “Come, let’s get you home.”

He helped Revasha up and let her hold onto his arm as he waited for her to regain her bearings. Her knees shook and she grimaced.

“If you still feel ill,” said Solas, “I have a spell which can relieve nausea.”

“I’ll be fine,” she muttered. “Thank you.”

They walked back to the Inquisition camp, but it was dark when they arrived and Lavellan wasn’t sure if Revasha was up for the trek back, so he convinced her to stay with the Inquisition for the night and sent a letter back so Keeper Hawen wouldn’t worry. They also lent her some spare clothes since hers was bloodstained.

Lavellan stood by the fringes of camp, half-hidden by the shadows of the trees. Revasha was by the campfire, surrounded by a few scouts and some of his companions, and he smiled as she laughed at something Sera and Bull said.

“Why aren’t you joining them?”

He turned his head just as he heard the wooden notes of Solas’ wolves.

Lavellan looked away. “Why aren’t you?”

Solas didn’t answer. Didn’t fill the silence with banter or a precursor to a discussion and Lavellan hadn’t realised how much that stung.

It was quiet for another few, crushing seconds, before Solas finally broke it and said, “Do not blame yourself for what happened with Revasha today.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Predictable, rather.”

“Well we can’t have that,” he said wryly.

“I trust you taught and consoled her well in the aftermath,” said Solas. Lavellan scanned the sentiment for any insincerity and found none.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Solas,” Lavellan admitted. “I don’t know how much I should expose her to, how much I should shelter her.”

“All birds must leave the nest.”

“Yeah, ease them instead of giving their backside a boot off the edge.”

“Revasha was already falling. You taught her to fly before she could hit the ground.”

He pursed his lips and looked up at the stars. “She should be worrying about her hunt, not... this.”

“And you should be worrying about your clan’s next rations, not the fate of the world,” said Solas.

Lavellan didn’t answer.

Near the campfire, Sera took out her bow and showed Revasha something and Lavellan smiled again. Sera *could* teach. She had the capacity for it, had done it in the past, had trained some of the Jennies herself.

“In any case,” said Solas, “while Revasha may be young and, ideally, should not have gone through what she had at such an age, you are doing the best you can to ensure she is cared for. In the future, she will realise she was taught by one of the best leaders the world has had to offer.”

Lavellan scowled at him. “You’re being contradictory. I thought you said I was, what was it you said? A proud and arrogant man with unparalleled hubris? A living *god*?” he spat, hoped Solas would flinch, but he didn’t. He at least had the decency to look ashamed.

“I did not mean it,” he said softly. “I was... blinded by my fears. My fears that you will forget, that I will have to—” He shook his head “I did not mean it. But I did mean my worry.”

“Then why didn’t you just tell me that?” Lavellan asked, doing his best to suppress the flash of hurt. “Instead of yelling at me and accusing me of things you know would hurt me? I let you see who I am and I bared my weaknesses to you but then you use them against me? What am I supposed to make of that?”

Solas bowed his head, gaze downcast.

Lavellan balled his fists, shoulders rising, everything within him shaking. He pulled back his arm.

“I’m about to punch you,” he warned.

Solas frowned. “Why warn me?”

“So you know it’s coming.”

“I do not deserve the warning.”

“No,” agreed Lavellan. “But this isn’t for your benefit. It’s for mine.”

Solas stared. Lavellan waited, fist by his side.

Then, Solas placed his staff down and faced Lavellan, nodded.

All of Lavellan’s hurt, all his fury, all his sorrow and pain, he packed into his hand.

And punched.

The brief give of skin, the hardness of bone, and a split-second burst of sharp pain.

Solas staggered back. Lavellan gritted his teeth and cradled his sore knuckles. He was still shaking.

Lavellan wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but he was unsurprised that he didn’t feel better.

Nothing. No vindication. No satisfaction. His hand just fucking hurt.

Solas straightened, one hand to his cheek, expression grim.

It was quiet. Lavellan's heartbeat was too loud in his ears.

"Nothing," Lavellan said, huffing out a sharp breath. "Hurting you just ended up hurting me too."

Solas said nothing. Couldn't meet Lavellan's gaze.

Pressure built behind Lavellan's eyes, but it wasn't the kind which threatened to spill into tears. Just— there. Lavellan swallowed and shook his hand out.

"I once sought to hurt a man," Lavellan found himself saying, "because he had hurt me. And it ended with us shoving each other to our graves." Solas still wouldn't look at him. "There has to be a better way of doing this."

Solas let out a soft breath. "What do you suggest?"

Lavellan scoffed. "No. *You* think of something. I feel like I've been pulling our weight all this time. Show me it's still worth pulling and actually do some hauling your damn self."

"Do you think it's worth pulling?"

"Don't fucking give up before you've even begun," he snapped. "Don't—" His voice cracked. He recomposed himself. "*Try*. If you give up, then I'll know I was right all along."

Solas finally looked at him, weary. "About what?"

"That you never gave a damn about me." Lavellan's mouth twisted, brows pinching, but he fought to keep his expression neutral.

The quiet drowned his lungs. In the distance, faint laughter.

"We have to change," Lavellan murmured. "This isn't sustainable."

"Can we?" he asked, looking as ancient as the trees which stood sentinel in this ancestral forest.

"*Not in a dream*," Lavellan had said to Fen'Harel. They were awake now.

"I'm willing to try," he said. "Are you?"

Solas stared at the ground.

Lavellan rubbed his eyes. He retreated into the forest and left Solas to think about it, his knuckles throbbing.

Chapter End Notes

Well it's... something. Progress. A little.

MORE CHAPTER ART BY CHILDISH_MIDGET! ONE OF THEM'S MY FAVOURITE SCENES.

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

Also this was 90% Revasha haha, my hand slipped. Lavellan's feeling a little paternal.

I'm fuckin laughing tho. This girl just--

Cole: *says his creepy shit*

Revasha:

Revasha: neat. so when can i throw myself at enemies hahren

She's got her priorities.

(Listen, I just have. quite a bit of love for Sera. and i don't get the opportunity to explore her much during the fic since i have to be selective. which is a damn fucking shame on my end. anyway, i love sera, aight?)

RandomPseudonym commented that they hope Lavellan reforms because of Cass, not because of Solas, and I hope you know I was looking directly at it becoz you were absolutely goddamn right

(psst, hey, i got Cass, Varric, and Cole's POV on when they first realised solas and/or lavellan were in love [here](#))

Translation

[1] **Da'vherassan**: Little tiger^[1]

[2] **Vir Tanadhal, Vir Assan?**: The Way of Three Trees, the Way of the Arrow? (The Vir Tanadhal is a philosophy that Dalish hunters follow and the Way of the Arrow is the first tenet)^[1]

A hand to the future

Chapter Notes

[Self-care checkpoint! Reminder to walk, stretch, hydrate, eat, or sleep if you're able to :)]

My proofreader's busy this week so this chapter wasn't proofread by anyone else besides yours truly, lmao, sorry we back to the sleep-deprived chapters.

Happy holidays <3 Last chapter of 2020!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

successors of the morning light—

“I wish to give a mourning halla to Red Crossing,” said Keeper Hawen as they walked through the clan’s aravels. Gazes still followed Lavellan, but they were more curious than wary, and their suspicion had lessened significantly since Lavellan’s first meeting with them. The clan was warmer now, more welcoming. The edges of his homesickness were dulling. “We both had a part to play in the tragedy. If you could somehow get them to accept this gesture...”

“I’ll see what I can do,” promised Lavellan.

“Thank you, da’len.”

“How is everyone feeling about the information?”

Keeper Hawen stopped walking and sighed, clasping his hands behind his back as he glanced skywards. “Various reactions, but this was what Taven wanted to give to us, and so, no matter how sour the taste, we will accept it.” He shook his head. “And it is history. If the Emerald Knights were willing to accept their folly, so must we. Now the other problem is the lack of a First. Valorin is no longer with us too.”

“Are you the only mage left in Clan Venalin?” he asked.

“For now. The young ones may end up being mages, I am not certain. If not, we will simply have to find another clan with a surplus of mages.” He smiled and faced Lavellan. “But not all is tragic. Revasha’s sixteenth is in four days. Tradition dictates that she dance with a guardian during the bonfire. Usually a parent but...”

Lavellan’s expression turned grim. But Revasha had no parents. “If not the parents then the Keeper,” Lavellan said. “Or she chooses another guardian.” Another relative or parental figure within the clan. Lavellan had chosen the old Warleader when he’d come of age and Ellana had chosen the Keeper.

“She has chosen you.”

Lavellan blinked. “Me? Doesn’t she have aunts or uncles or older cousins? Or even the elders in Clan Venalin? Seriously, *anyone* else more qualified than me?”

“Her father had no siblings, her uncle passed away when she was young, and she has no cousins. She views the elders with respect, but I think, ultimately, she feels a more familial bond with you.”

His heart clenched. “We haven’t known each other that long,” he said. “And I’ve been remiss with her. I’ve exposed her to— Well…” Lavellan looked down, lips pursing.

Keeper Hawen placed a solid hand on his shoulder, smiling gently. “Da’len, we do not get to choose the duration it takes to feel attached to somebody. You have given her direction and guidance and care, especially at such a vulnerable and significant time of her life. Perhaps she’s been exposed to events she shouldn’t have gone through at her age, but you were there to catch her when she fell. That is all we can ask. Will you consider leading her through her dance?”

“Why didn’t she ask me herself?”

“I suspect she felt embarrassed. Or afraid you wouldn’t take her request seriously. If you wish to decline guardianship, that is also alright.”

Lavellan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ve forgotten the dance. Someone will have to remind me.”

Keeper Hawen’s smile brightened into a radiant beam. “We have four days,” he assured.

“Nervous?” asked Lavellan.

Revasha tightened her grip on her bow but her gaze remained resolute. “Not about the hunt. More nervous about the vallaslin.”

It was the morning of her sixteenth birthday. The day would begin with her First Hunt, and after returning with a creature that she’d hunted, Revasha would receive her vallaslin. After the vallaslin: the bonfire dance and the feast.

Solas was on a stump a small distance away from them, transcribing the paper rubbings they’d found in Din’an Hanin to give to Clan Venalin. He looked up at Revasha’s mention of the vallaslin. His cheek was still bruised.

Lavellan looked away.

“It’s just— My friends have always known what vallaslin they want to get but I don’t.”

“Sometimes people choose their vallaslin to honour a god,” he said. “Sometimes people get it because of the attributes associated with the god, or hell, maybe you just like how it looks.”

“I want it to mean something,” she said.

“Some get their parent’s vallaslin to honour them instead,” he suggested. “There’s a lot of reasons. My mother chose Sylaise’s vallaslin because her father had it. My sister chose Mythal’s because of her wisdom.”

Revasha glanced at him. “And you? Dirthamen?”

Because everything within me, to the marrows of my bones, spills with devotion and worship.

“Loyalty to family,” he said.

She blinked. “Oh. I mean, I guess that’s true. Familial stuff is more of Sylaise’s domain though, isn’t it? Or even Mythal. All-Mother and everything.”

“I was more focused on the loyal part of it,” he said and smiled. “What about Andruil? You’re good with a bow, and you’re a good hunter.”

“Maybe.” She rubbed the arm holding her bow. “Mae had that vallaslin. I could get it. Protect the clan like she did.”

“A solid choice,” he said.

“What if I change my mind in the future? What if it doesn’t apply anymore?”

“That’s fine. Who you are now is rarely who you’ll be in the future. But at the end of the day, whether you’re honouring a god or not, the vallaslin stands for the Dalish. That it stands for our pride and endurance. Meanings can change over time.”

Solas’ stare prickled at the back of his neck.

The hunting horn sounded. Revasha took a deep breath.

“Ready?” he asked.

Revasha nodded and he walked her to the starting point where the elders and some of her peers were waiting with a halla.

“[Andruil’enaste, da’vherassan](#),” he said. “[Lasa eman solas](#).”^[1]

“[Juegaran ena’sal’inast](#)”^[2],” she promised and slid on the halla’s back.

He smiled. “Hunt well.”

After the elders blessed her and hung a necklace of beads around her neck, a symbol of Andruil’s blessing, she urged her halla into the forest and disappeared.

“Stay safe,” he murmured and focused instead on recalling the steps for tonight’s dance.

Lavellan eyed the sun’s position and paced, muttering under his breath. Where was she? It was getting late, and there was still the vallaslin to receive. Most First Hunts didn’t go past early afternoon.

What if she was in trouble? What if she’d gotten too ambitious and found herself in a difficult situation? What if she was hurt?

The hunting horn echoed and some weight lifted from his shoulders. He made his way towards the starting point, expecting to see Revasha with whatever she’d hunted, but instead, a few elves were riding into the forest on their halla. The others gathered to see what the fuss was about. Lavellan’s stomach dropped. He found Keeper Hawen and caught his attention.

“Hahren, is something wrong? Where’s Revasha?”

Keepe Hawen looked back into the forest with a frown. “I’m not certain, I only just arrived. But if the horn sounded then she *should* be back.”

“Why are the others riding out?”

The others murmured amongst themselves.

“Is she in trouble?”

“The others rode out in such a hurry.”

His heart raced and he looked around frantically for the Halla Keeper, stumbled across Solas, who must have come to see what was going on. His gaze locked with Lavellan’s panicked one.

“Is everything alright?” Solas asked.

“I don’t know. Are there any spare halla? Where’s Ithiren?”

“I passed the halla enclosure. It was empty save for the injured ones and Hanal’ghilan.”

They’d taken *most* of the halla? That couldn’t be a good sign.

“They’re back!” someone cried. Holy shit, Lavellan’s heart couldn’t take this. He whipped his head so fast that he feared his neck would snap and rushed to scene, Solas following at a calmer pace.

A crowd had formed and was blocking his vision, though he heard the drag of something heavy, the trot of halla hooves, exclamations and murmurs. *Oh gods, please be alright*, echoed like a mantra in his head. The others noted his arrival and stepped aside.

He stopped at the sight, eyes wide, breath hitching.

Revasha slid off her halla with a triumphant grin. Behind her, being dragged by the other halla, was a dead *bear*.

Her eyes sparkled, grin widening, and she sprinted towards him with an excited shriek. He opened his arms and she jumped into them.

“You’re absolutely mad!” he exclaimed as he spun them with a disbelieving laugh. “A *bear*? I’m so proud, holy shit—” He put her down and inspected her. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” she laughed.

“I’m going to get a heart attack.”

“Sit down then, old man.”

“I think I’ll do that.” He felt for a nearby surface. “I’m going to sit down. Holy sh—”

Lavellan had calmed significantly afterwards. A few Inquisition members who knew Revasha

arrived by late afternoon to attend the bonfire and feast, while Lavellan lingered near the aravel that Revasha and Keeper Hawen had disappeared into for her vallaslin. He turned and retreated into the forest and practiced the steps for tonight's dance.

It was late afternoon by the time Revasha finished with her vallaslin.

He expected to see Andruil's stylised bow inked upon her face.

Instead, the ink branched over her forehead, around her eyes. A leafless tree.

"Mythal," he said, surprised. "I thought you said Andruil."

She rubbed her arm, skin still red and irritated around the ink.

"I thought so too," she said, "but then I thought about what you said. About attributes. Andruil is the huntress, but Mythal watches over everyone. She's a good leader and I... I want to be that. I don't just want to hunt and shoot things." She smiled. "You showed me that more work goes into leading than I'd expected. It's kind of hard. And a lot."

"It is, and like I said: it's something you'll learn as you do it. Though it never hurts to ask for help every now and again." He hesitated. "Are you sure you want to be Warleader so soon? Olafin said he's more than willing to be Warleader for the time it takes for you or one of your peers to mature."

"I'm sure," she said. "Besides, I can always ask the older hunters for advice."

He smiled. "Good. It's good to ask for help. Did it hurt?"

Lavellan expected her to bristle and deny it but she shrugged instead. "When it got near the eyes. Did yours hurt?"

"I think so," he said. "Noses don't like being stabbed, apparently." Revasha rubbed the bit of vallaslin over her nose and wrinkled it in agreement. He reached into the pocket of his coat. "Now that you've gotten your vallaslin, it's time for your present!"

Her eyes sparked. "You got me a gift?"

"Made," he said, although he hadn't realised that her birthday was coming when he'd made the carving, so it was serendipitous. He presented her the tiger carving wrapped in cloth, fastened by colourful strings, each representing a god.

She unwrapped the cloth and Lavellan waited, tense. Revasha's eyes widened.

"Whoa," she murmured, running careful fingers over it, and grinned. "So it was from you. All your friends had them. I thought it was an Inquisition thing and was wondering where yours was." She closed her hand around it, eyes softening. "Thank you, hahren. Maybe I'll tie it to my quiver like Sera does."

"I'm glad you like it," he said and smiled, aglow with happiness.

"Something to remember you by at least for when you leave."

Lavellan blinked at the answer. She shuffled her feet, rubbing her arm again.

"I hope it wasn't weird that I wanted you to be my guardian for the dance," she said. "I just... Yeah. Thanks."

"I was honoured you chose me, da' vherassan," he said. "Now go, you need to prepare for tonight's bonfire. So do I."

Revasha smiled to herself as she turned and left to get ready. Lavellan glanced up at the purple, twilight sky. Time for him to prepare too.

The sound of wooden wolves rang behind him.

"You have reared a successor."

"You have a terrible habit of eavesdropping." Lavellan faced Solas, who had rolls of paper tucked under his arm.

"I did not mean to," said Solas. "I was just passing by."

Lavellan's gaze fell on the bruise on Solas' cheek. Why hadn't he healed it?

"Successor?" asked Lavellan, looking away. "What exactly am I passing on?"

"The future."

He frowned and looked back at Solas.

"Your future," Solas murmured.

"*My* future?"

"The bright future you strive for. You are training her to lead as you do. Perhaps it was unintentional on your end, but you are preparing her to be a protector of that future, or someone who can carry your dream, if she wishes." He surveyed his surroundings, watching everyone prepare for tonight. "This is how you all remain immortal."

Lavellan paused at the tone in his voice. He couldn't place what it was. Something vulnerable.

Solas turned. "In any case, I do not wish to keep you from your preparations. I will see you tonight."

He walked away. Lavellan watched him go.

Keeper Hawen placed upon Lavellan's head a headdress made of leaves and ironbark carved to look like halla horns, strings of red beads draped across them. A red collar of braided cloth and dangling beads rested on Lavellan's shoulders, a woven skirt of red and gold halla wool reaching to his knees. His chest, stomach, and arms had been painted with red designs. Lots of red. It was Clan Venalin's signature colour, after all.

Keeper Hawen placed the wooden bangles around Lavellan's wrists and ankles and stepped back with a smile.

Lavellan fiddled with the bangles, the knocking wood echoing in the aravel. How long had it been since he'd dressed in Dalish garb? Had he ever flaunted his culture and traditions? Or had he quietly assimilated into what the others wished for him to be? For all his talk of encouraging Dalish

pride, he'd been remiss with himself.

"Da'len?" asked Keeper Hawen. "Is everything alright?"

"I just... I've been disconnected from my culture," he said. "It's hard. I'm called the herald of a prophet I never even believed in, the saviour from a faith not my own. From a faith with a history of persecuting our people. I don't know who I am at this point." He rubbed his eyes. "The clan was right to be wary of me. I may as well be Dalish in nothing but appearance."

He placed his hands on Lavellan's shoulders, as if grounding him. "You've been entrusted with a difficult role. I see now the responsibility upon your shoulders, as if you are the Keeper of the entire world. Others watch for your misstep. You have become a representative of all Dalish, of all elves, so you must act a certain way to keep us safe."

Lavellan pursed his lips. Even so, he should have been more adamant. They were already being erased enough. He shouldn't make it easier for future historians to find a way to remove his heritage from the narrative.

"But it warms my heart to see that you still try to reconnect with us," said Keeper Hawen. "You care for us, you have not forgotten us, and you have not disavowed us. You are Dalish. Know that in your heart." He pressed his forehead against Lavellan's. "We are ever grateful for your efforts."

"Thank you, hahren," he whispered, swallowing the lump in his throat.

"If it really troubles you and you would like to feel as if you're reclaiming yourself, we could give you items to remember the Dalish by when you leave."

Lavellan smiled. "I'd like that."

But are you even Dalish? Are you even a part of this world?

Or maybe you belong nowhere.

You should have stayed dead.

The drumbeats began outside and startled Lavellan away from those thoughts. Keeper Hawen fixed his robes and grabbed his staff.

"Shall we?" he asked and Lavellan nodded, mouth dry.

They stepped out, the ground cool beneath Lavellan's feet, and approached the large, roaring bonfire where the clan had gathered along with a few members of the Inquisition. The bonfire had been enchanted to contain the fire within it. Last thing they wanted was to accidentally set the forest ablaze.

Revasha was on the other side of the bonfire but Lavellan wouldn't be able to see her yet. Not until the dance.

Keeper Hawen recited an elven verse while Lavellan took up his position at one end of the bonfire, shaking off the remnants of his disturbing thoughts. Forget those for now. Tonight was a night for celebration.

Once Keeper Hawen finished, the drumbeats started again, embellished with bone shakers.

He pushed aside the self-consciousness brought about by the watchful eyes glinting from the

firelight and began the dance.

Lavellan danced his way around half of the bonfire, bangles chiming during specific movements to add to the percussion. He soon encountered Revasha, who was waiting at the other end, wearing the white woven halla robes and sash patterned with Clan Venalin's signature colours and design — the traditional garb for one coming of age. She danced a mirror of his movements, her own bangles joining the chime of his.

The tempo kicked up and Lavellan led the way across the other half of the bonfire, spotted a few of his friends among the crowd.

Upon returning to where he'd started, the tempo accelerated again and the dance turned sprightly, their feet kicking, arms weaving. Revasha stopped following and mirroring and instead danced a series of steps to complement his.

The entire dance was symbolic. The guardian would first lead the way and show the child how to move around Elgar'nan's fire of life, then the child would eventually find their own rhythm and dance.

Revasha grinned as the tempo kicked up for the last time and they shared a laugh as they both spun around one another, their bangles chiming and the others cheering.

As his dance neared its end, he removed his headdress and bestowed it upon Revasha while he recited the traditional Elvish verse that the guardian would give to the child.

He offered her a soft smile after. "I'm proud of you," he said. "And I know your parents are too."

She returned his smile with a wobbly one of her own and bowed her head. Lavellan stepped back so she could dance back to where she'd started with the headdress now on, and he looked upon her with pride. After the dance, everyone cheered.

The celebration kicked in. A new song began, and people stood and danced around the bonfire, some ducking out for food.

Lavellan looked for his friends and laughed at Bull and Dorian being taught a dance by four elderly women. Cassandra was by the banquet discussing something with another elf. Cole was somewhere wandering as per usual.

Revasha dragged him back into the fray and he danced with her, before urging her to go dance with her friends.

A new song started again, joined by vocalisations that Lavellan recognised. A song that the Dalish had sung at the end of their Long Walk. A song of home and celebration.

His eyes fell on Solas still sitting, watching the festivities with an unidentifiable expression, the firelight casting a masquerade of shadows over his face as if making up for his lack of dancing. For a moment, it was as if the heavy shadows were cloaking him, pulling him away, trapping him in his spiralling thoughts.

Lavellan approached Solas and held out a hand. Solas started, eyes wide as he stared up at him.

"Dance with me?" Lavellan asked.

"With me? Are you certain?"

“I’m asking you, aren’t I?”

“I— I do not know the steps.”

“I can teach you,” he said. “This one’s simple, I promise.”

He hesitated, but slowly, he took Lavellan’s hand. Lavellan pulled Solas up and dragged him closer to the fire, the heat of it pressing against their faces.

“Like this,” said Lavellan and showed him the steps. “When your hands pass your thighs, slap them against it lightly. It adds as percussion.”

Solas followed easily and got it right the first few tries, as usual. He shot Lavellan an uncertain look and Lavellan nodded, smiling.

“You taught me a dance from Elvhenan,” said Lavellan. “Let me return the favour and teach you a Dalish dance. The elves sang and danced this when they reached Halamshiral after their Long Walk.”

He guided Solas where he could, though it wasn’t needed. Soon, they danced around one another, occasionally meeting up to clap their hands as the tempo once again picked up, all spry steps and snappy yet fluid movements. A soft smile replaced Solas’ tentative expression.

Their eyes met and Lavellan couldn’t look away again, caught in the colours of Solas’ eyes turned impossible by the reflection of the fire and dark shadows and tumult of emotions within it.

“Good!” Lavellan praised. “We’re going to swap partners soon.”

His face pulled in mild panic. “Wait, I do not think—”

“Don’t think; move!” Lavellan urged and guided Solas to another partner while he found another.

Lavellan grinned as he danced from partner to partner, their laughing, joyful faces reflecting the face of home. His heart warmed. As warm as the bonfire.

He looked for Solas and found him dancing with a sprightly old woman. Solas was laughing softly.

The warmth in Lavellan’s heart surpassed the bonfire’s.

Another swap of partners. Revasha again. She grinned up at him.

“Tired yet, hahren?”

“I’m not that old, da’vherassan. I can outdance you.”

“Are you sure? I can hear your bones creaking.”

He let out an offended gasp, but they both laughed. They danced around one another, his bangles and beads clicking, before one final partner swap came.

Revasha smiled mischievously and shoved him.

Lavellan stumbled. “Vasha—!”

He collided against Solas, who caught him.

Solas chuckled by his ear. “Weary on your feet, lethallin?”

“Very funny.” Lavellan turned and faced him, grinning stupidly, but he couldn’t find it in him to suppress it. The warmth swelled within his chest. The awkwardness had gone from Solas’ movements, and he was well and truly flowing with the music now. “Any interesting dance partners?”

“There was an excitable little boy who made me feel quite old and unable to keep up,” he said, lips twitching, “and a grandmother who also made me feel quite old and unable to keep up.”

“Never underestimate Dalish grandmothers.”

“So I am learning,” he laughed, orange firelight washing over him, the haunted shadows within his eyes fading. The flickering lights seemed more playful than melancholy now.

The dance ended far too soon. Lavellan found himself somewhat out of breath, too warm from being near the fire, but he was still smiling.

“Have you eaten?” asked Solas.

“I don’t think so.”

“Come, you must have expended a lot of your energy dancing for almost half the night like that.” Their hands were clasped. Lavellan wasn’t sure how that had happened but Solas was holding on as if seeking a lifeline and anchor, so Lavellan didn’t comment on it.

“Has it really been that long?” Lavellan asked instead, letting Solas pull him to the banquet table.

“Time flies when you are enjoying yourself.”

Lavellan’s eyes fell on the tray of honeyed bread buns shaped into various animals and gasped. When was the last time he’d had those? Six years ago? He picked the one shaped like a wolf and laughed, waving the bread at Solas.

“By the Bread Wolf!” he cried.

Solas’ expression turned unimpressed.

Ithiren walked past and Lavellan brandished the bread at his face menacingly

“Bread Wolf take you!” said Lavellan.

Ithiren laughed and groaned at the same time. “Da’len, the children always make that joke.”

“He *is* a child,” grumbled Solas while Ithiren walked away with a chuckle. “Eat your bread.”

Lavellan bit into it and tore the head off. Solas pressed his lips into a disturbed line.

“Would you like some?” Lavellan asked and offered the decapitated bread at him, resisted smiling.

“...No, thank you.”

“I see you’re not willing to *rise* to the challenge.” He shrugged and Solas scowled. Lavellan was sweaty, hadn’t realised. “I’m going to take a walk and cool off.”

“May I walk with you?” asked Solas and Lavellan glanced at him. He had a grave and serious look

about him again. “I would like to talk to you about something.”

Lavellan eyed him for a moment, something twisting in his stomach, and nodded.

Solas’ gaze fell on their still joined hands as if only just realising, and let go. Lavellan’s hand felt cold.

They walked into the forest, leaving the cheers of the celebration behind until they faded, and the two of them were left coated in the night-time silence and light from the twin moons. Lavellan finished his bread. Still, Solas stayed quiet and Lavellan let him sort out his thoughts.

Lavellan picked flowers along the way, tucking them in the hollow of the trees or within a bush. Little surprises for whomever found them.

“I wished to apologise.”

They stopped walking and Lavellan stared. Solas couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You were right. I did not go about expressing my concerns commendably. I did not present the opportunity for a constructive discussion, and I hurt you, and I have been cruel. And I am not proud of it.” His eyes glimmered with sorrow and sincerity. “I am sorry.”

Lavellan’s shoulders fell, pressed under something heavy.

“And how long will your apology last?” Lavellan asked. “How long until we fall into another argument, until we yell and hurt each other again? How *long* will this sorry last?”

Solas cast his gaze down once more, but he didn’t answer.

“I can’t keep doing this,” said Lavellan, his tone turning imploring. “I can’t keep doing this on and off arguing with you. I’m tired of this back and forth thing that will be fine for the first few weeks before something new makes us explode. I know everyone’s come to expect that of us but I don’t... I don’t want that as our normal. This is just *tiring*.”

Solas still didn’t answer, gaze downcast.

“Talk to me, Solas. Please.”

Solas let out a shaky exhale and met Lavellan’s gaze, eyes dark. “I am sorry, truly, for having burdened and exhausted you this much. If our relationship is truly putting a strain on you, then perhaps it’s for the best if we maintain a professional distance.”

Lavellan stared at him, his face falling.

“What, that’s it?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper. “Not even worth trying? So I never meant a damn after all?”

“No! That is not— You—” He made a frustrated sound, but it wasn’t directed at Lavellan. “I do not wish to hurt you any more than I already have.”

“So you’d rather cut it off than go through the trouble of trying? I don’t get a say in this? It’s for *my* own good is it?” Solas was doing it again. *It’ll be kinder in the long run*, Solas had said. *I would not have you see what I become*. Fucker had never even asked about what Lavellan had wanted.

Solas’ face pulled further and the atmosphere was beginning to sour. He opened his mouth, but he

paused. He closed it. “Will you— give me a moment.”

Lavellan frowned as Solas closed his eyes and turned away, his expression smoothing. It was quiet for a few uncomfortable seconds.

“Very well,” Solas said, voice calmer as he opened his eyes and faced Lavellan again. “I merely meant that one should endeavour to distance themselves from a person causing them harm. When you are gardening, you uproot the weeds. Why is that displeasing?”

“Because you’re not a weed.” Lavellan rubbed an irritated hand down his face. “Because I think, when we’re not blowing our tops off at one another, that we actually get along well. Because I enjoy your company when we aren’t yelling. Because I miss you when we stop talking after a fight.” He looked away. “Because I want you in my life,” he finished softly.

The admission pulled a faint, shuddering breath from Solas, and when Lavellan looked, something vulnerable was flickering behind Solas’ eyes. Sorrowful yet alight with an emotion that Lavellan didn’t want to name just yet.

“You asked me to think of a better way of doing this,” said Solas. “This is my proposed solution, but you seem to think it’s a lack of one.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked. “This is just running. When I said there had to be a better way, I meant a better way of interacting. This ‘solution’ feels like you’re saying that it’s not even worth trying, it’s not worth putting the effort in.” He looked back at Solas. “That *I’m* not worth trying for.”

Solas stood, stunned. “That was not what I meant.”

“Well that’s what it sounded like. You’re deciding what’s supposedly good for me without consulting me.” He hugged himself. “I don’t want a *professional* distance. I don’t want you pulling away or cutting off ties or walking away and pretending like it’s not going to gut you as much as it’d gut me.”

Lavellan pressed his lips tight before something unwanted could escape and turned his head away, brows scrunching.

“If you truly want to put distance in our friendship,” said Lavellan, pushing the words through the tangle in his chest, “I can’t stop you. I won’t. I’ll respect your wishes.” He searched Solas’ eyes. “But *is* that what you want?”

“No,” Solas whispered.

“Then what *do* you want?” Lavellan chanced a step closer, almost grabbed Solas to shake him, but resisted. Solas’ expression twisted as if every second of this was torture, and Lavellan was certain it was.

“What I want—” He looked into Lavellan’s eyes. “I want...” He hung his head and let out a soft breath. “I want to be allowed to want. Without being bound to the world.”

“Then forget the world!” Lavellan grabbed his shoulders then, curbed the hysteria from his tone. “Just this moment, forget the world, forget the burdens, forget the pull of hands and pleas from ghosts. What do *you* want?”

Solas said nothing. Lavellan stopping himself from gripping his shoulders tighter.

“I...” Solas started. Paused.

Another span of uncomfortable quiet passed.

Then, Solas raised his head, eyes earnest and alive with a roar of emotions. “I want you in my life, too.”

Lavellan let out a punched breath, eyes widening.

“Well,” Lavellan croaked and attempted a smile. “That’s a start.”

A cool, nightly breeze wove between the trees. The warmth that Lavellan had earned from the flames and dancing was waning with every second.

“Mahanon, I—” Solas’ conflicted expression returned, and his gaze fixed on a distant point as if that could impart him with courage. “I...”

Lavellan frowned, waited, but the more Solas deliberated it, the more his conflict intensified.

“I’m—” Solas sighed in irritation and his gaze fell again. The conflicted expression melted, replaced by defeat, and his shoulders slumped. “I find myself more involved with the Dalish than I have ever been,” was what he said. “It is an opportunity I was never presented with, to get to know a clan as intimately as Clan Venalin has allowed.”

No, that wasn’t what he’d meant to say, Lavellan could tell. But what else could he have—

I’m Fen’Harel.

Lavellan’s breath caught. Oh...

“I suspect you weren’t presented with many opportunities to get to know the Dalish this much,” said Lavellan, going with it. His hand fell from Solas’ shoulders. *He tried, he tried*— “How are you finding us now?”

“I have always enjoyed your company,” said Solas.

“Not me. The rest of Clan Venalin, at the very least.”

He shook his head. “I am not singling you out. Not in the way that you think. I merely meant that because I’ve enjoyed your company, I thought that perhaps I should give the Dalish another chance. That perhaps there are those whose company I will enjoy as well.”

Lavellan’s heart leapt to his throat. He swallowed it back down. “And?”

“And...” Solas looked away. “Perhaps a few are terrible, and a few are not, because clans are of varying sizes, and there is a diversity of people within it.” A pained light danced in his eyes. “I apologise for the hurtful things I said when we first met. The Dalish are not shadows. They have become something else while I was not looking, and now I am confronted by it. All I saw was what they could be, what they once have been,” he admitted. “They are almost entirely different from the ancient elves. That remains a frightening thought.”

Perhaps he couldn’t tell the truth about Fen’Harel, but he wanted to at least attempt in other areas. Maybe he was doing what Lavellan was: dropping hints in the hopes somebody would piece it together so they could avoid the admission.

“Why?” Lavellan asked gently. Although he knew why.

“It...” He hesitated, but he pushed through even though he looked as if he’d swallowed a whole

brick of tea. “It confirms that I am alone.”

Lavellan raised his hand, faltered, but he shook aside his hesitation and cupped the back of Solas neck and pressed their foreheads together. His other hand settled over Solas’ heart, thumb resting in the dip of Solas’ collarbones, feeling the light flutter of Solas’ pulse beneath it. The bangles slid down Lavellan’s arm.

“I know it’s not the same,” Lavellan murmured, “and I know I can never understand, but we’re here. Maybe we’re not the exact same as what you’re searching for, but we will never let you be alone. You have a place here. And I know you had your reservations, but thank you for trying to befriend the others. It hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

Solas’ hand gripped the one Lavellan had rested above his heart. “You do not understand,” he said. “*That* is the problem.”

“That I don’t understand?”

“That you have given me a place. I cannot— I am not—” He took in another shaky breath. “Irabelas, Mahanon. I have not made this any easier on you.”

“Neither have I,” he snorted. “But I meant it, Solas. I want you in my life. You widen my horizons. You challenge and help me grow. You look after me when I can’t. And I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you for it before so... thank you.”

“You say all this even after I’ve hurt you.”

Lavellan’s gaze softened. “I have lines. I won’t let you keep hurting me if you keep doing it.”

“I do not want to hurt you.”

“I know,” he said. “And I— I’m sorry, too. I wasn’t listening to you or the others. I’ll... try.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

Lavellan smiled back.

Solas tightened his grip around Lavellan’s hand and he closed his eyes.

“I’ve dwelt within the world of dreams where colour dulled to endless grey,” he said. “When I awoke, I came to find the waking world a lifeless sheen, and yet you came along and tracked your touch, bled dye upon the grey. It runs without restraint and yet it paints a vivid, living piece that neither man nor god could make.”

Did he just— spit verse at him? Lavellan’s cheeks and ears flushed, heartbeat pacing. Traitors. “That’s very poetic of you,” he said. Quite literally too. Some things never change.

“It seems you inspire the poet within me, dreadful as it is.”

Was that a fucking pun?

Don’t laugh, oh Creators—

Lavellan forced himself to quiet and focus on his response, running the syllables in his head.

“You’ll find that I must disagree,” Lavellan said. “Your words have left me very charmed.” Not his best attempt but he was no bard.

Solas opened his eyes in surprise and his pulse quickened beneath Lavellan's hand. Lavellan suppressed a smile.

"Quicksilver tongue you seem to have," said Solas.

"How the hell do you do that so quick?" he grumbled and Solas chuckled as they pulled away and raised their heads. "Have you considered being a bard?"

"No. I've little skill in such a field."

Lavellan recalled when Solas had disguised himself as a bard to meet up with Charter in a *tea house*. Lavellan hadn't known whether to laugh or scream when he'd heard about it.

"How well can you do an Orlesian accent?" asked Lavellan.

"*Not very well, I'm afraid,*" he said, mimicking said accent. Lavellan blinked.

"Hey, that wasn't half bad," he said.

"*Perhaps I should endeavour to do it more often.*"

"Okay, no, stop," he laughed, and his hand dropped from Solas' chest, ignored how cold it felt without him.

"*If I ever find myself in need of employment, I must polish my skills to be a passable Orlesian bard.*"

"That turned *Nevarran*!" His laughter doubled and Solas looked on, completely austere, but a smile threatened the corner of his lips and his eyes shimmered with mischief.

"*Mock me not, Inquisitor Lavellan.*"

"Terrible!"

Solas finally cracked and he smiled.

"Right, we'll cross Orlesian bard off the list," said Lavellan, laughter dwindling.

"Perhaps that is for the best," agreed Solas, still smiling. They began the walk back, a fresh wash of buoyant emotions pressing against the spaces of Lavellan's ribs.

"So what now?" asked Lavellan. "Can we work at this?"

"Nothing is beyond hope."

Lavellan raised a brow. "Solas, I believe that almost sounded optimistic! Am I rubbing off on you?"

"Irritatingly so," he grumbled, but smiled when Lavellan laughed again. "We may end up arguing once more."

"Probably. But we can work on making them constructive and... I don't know, less... painful?"

"Healthier?" suggested Solas.

"That." Lavellan mussed his hair, hope and joy bubbling in his chest. "Our arguments don't have to

devolve into a screaming match. That's exhausting. And all of that silent treatment the next few days and awkwardness just hurts even more."

Solas clasped his hands behind his back and stared up at the stars. "I sometimes come to expect a humorous or insightful remark from you during the periods after a fight, and when it doesn't arrive, I am reminded that we are not on good terms."

"Me too," he admitted and stopped walking, Solas following suit. Lavellan offered his hand. "A promise to make this work?"

Solas stared at it, then reached out and threaded their fingers together instead of clasping it in a handshake. Lavellan swore his heart stopped and sprinted at the same time.

"A promise," said Solas.

It was Lavellan's left hand. Apparently, being flustered counted as distress because the Anchor flared and he yelped, pulling it away and tucking it under his arm. He laughed nervously at Solas.

"It, uh, it does that."

"You say the mark flares when you are in distress." He was frowning again and Lavellan waved him off.

"No, no. Well, yes. But also when I get— You know what, never mind. It's fine. Ignore it."

Solas stared at the hand shimmering like a broken star tucked in the crook of Lavellan's arm. *Behave*, Lavellan hissed at it and tugged at the Veil. He relaxed when the flickering stopped.

"If not distress, what then?" asked Solas.

"Surprise," he mumbled. That was a synonym of flustered, right?

Another breeze blew past and Lavellan shivered. Solas took his trademark woollen coat off and draped it over Lavellan's shoulders, securing it around him. Lavellan stared, fighting back a giddy smile.

"We should get you back to the fire to keep you warm. In the meantime, my coat is better than body paint and beads in warding off the cold."

Lavellan clutched the coat tighter around him. Warm. Smelled like smoke and Solas.

"Your clothes will smell like smoke for a while," said Lavellan.

"I have a spell for that," said Solas as they walked again.

He eyed him. "Where'd you learn it from?"

Solas opened his mouth to answer, but he paused, then frowned. "I do not recall. It must have been a while back."

Lavellan's mind whirled. *He* was the one who had taught it to Solas, but Solas didn't seem to be lying. Something really was interfering with both their memories.

"*Syn ma eolasas?*"^[3] he asked the Well, but only the whispers answered him.

When they returned to the Dalish encampment, he caught Bull and Dorian staring. Dorian held out

a waiting palm and Bull slapped a few coins into it with a grunt.

Solas didn't ask for his coat back. Lavellan didn't take it off.

Neither made mention of it.

Chapter End Notes

(I am not immune to the "give coat to s.o" trope)

Happy birthday to my grumpy little tiger, Vasha. And my goodness, is that? Communication?? Finally! Something happy for the holiday season.

(Pfff, the-- The Bread-- The Bread Wolf *rises*. ahahdhh)

Also, here's the sappy poem Solas made up on the spot (in actual poem form, this took me hours i can't believe solas did it on the spot, i hate that man):

I've dwelt within the world of dreams
where colour dulled to endless grey.
When I awoke, I came to find
the waking world a lifeless sheen
and yet you came along and tracked
your touch, bled dye upon the grey.
It runs without restraint and yet
it paints a vivid, living piece
that neither man nor god could make.

And so, I bid you all a happy holidays! Take care <3

Translation

[1]

Andruil'enaste, da'vherassan: Andruil's blessing, little tiger

Lasa eman solas: Make us proud (lit. grant us pride) [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Juvegaran ena'sal'inast:** (I) will be victorious [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Syn ma eolasas?:** Do you know? [\[↑\]](#)

Memoirs of blood and bone

Chapter Notes

Hello, I'm back! Taking a break for a week was the Worst, I'll never do it again if I can help it.

The first chapter of the new year. Let's gooo! (and look we've broken the 300k word mark! yall overall i've written over 400k words during 2020 that's wild)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

chasing dreams of snow—

“When are you leaving?” asked Revasha, watching the Inquisition wagons moseying past, packed up and ready.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “So it’s official? You’re being appointed Warleader?”

“In two weeks. Olafin’s going to brief me on how it all works and what my duties will be. It helps that I already know some things from Mae and you.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be here for the ceremony. I can’t be gone too long from Skyhold, what with all the decisions and paperwork.” He could already feel the headache coming along. “But I’ve still got all of today. I can talk you through a few more things. Maybe collaborate with Olafin while we’re at it.”

“I’d like that,” she said and smiled, the vallaslin on her face shifting. Still a little red around the lines.

They passed Solas and a few of the elders discussing the transcribed rubbings from Din’an Hanin. Lavellan and Solas' gazes met and Solas smiled, nodding in greeting. Lavellan returned it.

Revasha eyed him.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said airily. “Just wondering.”

“About?”

“If he’s your lethallin or if he’s your *lethallin*, if you catch my meaning.”

“I do not,” he replied tartly.

“Yes, you do.” She grinned and adopted a high-pitched voice, placed the back of her hand against her forehead, and swooned. “I wear his coat because he’s my beloved *lethallin*, I share meaningful looks with him over great distances because he’s my *lethallin*. Oh lethallin, oh lethallin, come embrace me, *lethallin*!”

Lavellan jabbed his elbow into her side. “I preferred it when you were glaring at me. At least you

weren't saying anything."

She made kissy noises. "Come hold me in your arms, I am lonely, *lethallin*." She cackled. "You wore his coat the whole night, hahren."

"I was cold, he was being nice."

They arrived at the Inquisition camp. Most of the tents were gone and packed away, while the rest of his companions were in the middle of packing their personal belongings.

Dorian looked up from trying to shove something into his pack, had caught the tail of Lavellan and Revasha's conversation.

"Oh, what's this?" Dorian asked. "Are we teasing him about wearing Solas' coat?"

"We're also teasing him about them calling each other *lethallin*."

"You two call each other that a lot," said Bull, resting his arm on Dorian's shoulder. Dorian didn't shrug it off. "What's it actually mean?"

"Means *dearest friend*," mocked Revasha. "Clan mate. Blood kin. It's for *very good friends*."

"Ah yes," laughed Dorian. "Jolly good friends! The absolute best."

"Mmh," agreed Bull. "Just staring at your best friend's bare chest, yeah. What does it mean when best friends fuck off into the forest and one of them is half-naked, then comes back with the best friend's clothes?"

"Whatever you're thinking, it's not it," muttered Lavellan. "It was cold, he had a coat. As simple as that."

"Oh?" asked Dorian. "And what were we thinking, pray tell?"

"Why are you picking on me? Go annoy Solas."

"I did. Last night. But you're much more fun to tease! All Solas said was, 'It is none of your business,'" he said, mimicking Solas' voice and put-upon expression, then huffed. "That's it."

Cole walked past, said, "Golden and glowing, promises in a graveyard but he puts everything to rest. I want to try."

Lavellan stared at Cole.

"I'm glad," said Cole with a soft smile, and off he went on his merry way.

"What?" asked Bull.

"None of your business!" Lavellan chirped.

Lavellan secured the saddle on his horse, heart heavy. He cast the forest around him another glance, memorised the rain of sunlight through the canopies, the staunch trees and mighty

branches, and the vibrant colours that spring had brought forth. He didn't want to leave.

"You alright, Glowzy?" asked Varric.

The others looked up at his question and stared at Lavellan with varying levels of worry.

"I'm fine," slipped out again before he could stop it but Varric shot him an unconvinced look and Lavellan sighed. "I don't want to leave."

Varric clapped him on the back. "I get you," he said. "Maybe when all this shit's finished, you can come back."

"I hope it does finish."

"Okay, maybe not finished, but when it's slightly less shit. How about that?"

He laughed. "Seems a bit more manageable."

They returned to their preparations, but Lavellan's heart wasn't in it.

Vivienne approached in his periphery. "Darling," she started, voice soft, "I have... a favour to ask of you." Her lips pressed into a grim line, something troubled in her eyes. His stomach dropped and he faced her fully. "There is an alchemical formula I must complete but I am missing a critical ingredient. I had arranged to obtain it but the chevaliers working with me were killed in the civil war. I am asking for your help in retrieving it."

"Of course, what is it?"

"I require the heart of a snowy wyvern."

"Alright."

She stared at him and he stared back. Vivienne frowned. "No questions? How strange, considering your nature. I had expected an interrogation from you."

"Your face screams, 'I don't want to talk about it.' I'm reading the room." And he'd been expecting this. Duke Bastien had been unable to attend the peace talks due to his health, after all. "Do you know where to find one?"

"It is not very far. It is in the Exalted Plains." She smiled. "It is not in the Emerald Graves, unfortunately. You may have been able to stay longer that way."

The unexpected yet thoughtful sentiment took him by surprise. No, he really shouldn't be surprised. She had her moments.

"Well, it's still the Dales," he said and smiled back. "Hopefully the Plains have been able to heal somewhat in that time."

Vivienne nodded. "I appreciate this, my dear." Her gaze fell on something over his shoulder. "And it seems you have one final goodbye to share."

He turned. Revasha and Keeper Hawen were walking towards them. Lavellan met them halfway.

"You really thought you were going to up and leave without saying goodbye?" asked Revasha.

Lavellan snorted fondly and ruffled her hair. She swatted his hand away with a grumble.

“I said goodbye yesterday. Extensively. I think I shared at least five goodbyes with most of the clan.”

“That was yesterday,” she huffed.

“Aww, are you going to miss me?”

“Obviously.”

Lavellan grinned and tipped his head in greeting at Keeper Hawen.

He nodded back with a smile and presented Lavellan with a woven rucksack. “For whenever you miss home,” he explained.

Lavellan took it graciously and opened it. The first item inside was a small halla bone amulet. A complicated pattern was carved onto its surface, but Lavellan could discern the rune hidden within the lines.

“It is an amulet that we found in one of the elven ruins we have explored in years past,” said Keeper Hawen. “Whenever the wearer suffers an injury, it places a barrier around them. Of course, it cannot compare to a mage casting the barrier.”

“But every second counts in battle,” said Lavellan with a soft breath. “Are— Are you sure you want to part with this? Your clan found it.”

“The clan and the elders have decided that we can happily part with it to express our collective gratitude for all you’ve done for us.” He held his hand out. “May I?”

Lavellan placed the amulet into it and bowed his head so Keeper Hawen could put it on him. The magic within the amulet hummed.

“You’ll also find a few handwoven blankets and scarves,” said Keeper Hawen. “We hear your fortress is high in the mountains. I expect it’s cold.”

“Quite,” laughed Lavellan, before it dwindled into a softer sound. He couldn’t stop smiling. “Thank you.”

Keeper Hawen smiled back, then nudged Revasha. She rubbed her arm.

“I made something,” she mumbled.

His brows raised. “For me?”

She nodded and reached into her pocket. Her hand stayed fisted around the item she was holding and at Keeper Hawen’s encouraging nod, she presented it. It was a hunting charm of braided leather and red and purple crystal beads. Lavellan accepted it, brushed his thumb over it.

“Ram and halla leather,” she said. “I also asked about Clan Lavellan’s colours and they said purple and blue so... Red and purple beads. For Clan Venalin and Lavellan.”

“Da’vherassan, making this would have required a lot of patience.”

“That’s my fifth attempt,” she groaned. “It took *so* long and it kept unravelling.”

“When did you start this?”

“When you left the first time. Keeper Hawen suggested I try making charms to test my patience.”

Lavellan unslung the bow on his back and tied the charm just below the grip. They supposedly helped ground the hunter so that their arrow would hit its mark.

“Thank you, Vasha,” he said. “Don’t hesitate to send me letters. There’ll still be Inquisition presence in the Dales so just approach one of the scouts and ask to send a letter to me. If you need advice, you’re free to ask too. So long as you’re fine with the wait.”

“I’m more patient now, didn’t you know?”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

She kicked his shin and he pulled a face at the pain. “Visit when you can.”

He chuckled. “Only if you don’t kick my shins.” He hugged her. “Goodbye Vasha. You’ll do great. Remember to ask for help when you need it.”

Revasha hugged him back. “You too.”

He shared his last goodbyes and finally got on his horse and urged it forward. One final time, he looked over his shoulder. Revasha waved. Lavellan smiled sadly.

During the ride to the Plains, Lavellan fiddled with the bone amulet and hunting charm, already missing home.

The skies had cleared in the Exalted Plains, no longer curtained in an orange haze, no longer marinating in the stench of despairing soldiers and husked corpses embroiled in a civil war. The rest of their group went on ahead back to Skyhold.

“Doesn’t smell like death and despair anymore,” remarked Varric. He’d tagged along because he wanted to procrastinate further on his paperwork. Solas had come along because he was suspicious of Vivienne, Cole because as always, he hesitated to stray far from Lavellan’s side, and Bull because, “Come on, Mercy, wyverns. *Wyverns*. And this one’s going to be pretty.”

“Lead on, Vivienne,” said Lavellan, and they rode to a section of the Plains that had been blocked by boulders, recently cleared by the Inquisition. They rode through a pass, beneath an elven arch, and into a camp that the Inquisition presence here had set up.

Lavellan eyed the halla statue above the pedestal of rock at the centre of the camp. Ghilan’nain.

A woman in white was standing by the base of the pedestal, staring up at the statue, her long hair as bright as her billowing robes. Barefoot. She glowed in the sun as if she were a fresh, undisturbed field of snow, skin so pale that Lavellan was certain he’d see her veins stark against her skin if he got any closer.

She turned her head, looked at him over her shoulder.

Black dripped from her lips.

Lavellan jolted back and his horse whinnied at the abrupt movement. His companions stopped and

stared back at him.

He glanced at the pedestal's base again, but the woman was gone.

"You alright, Mercy?" asked Bull. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"I... may have?"

Varric stared. "Hey, listen, the book I'm writing can only have so many genres crammed into it. Am I going to have to start marketing it as horror?"

"She was there, by the pedestal. Didn't you see her?"

"Mercy, don't shit with me."

"I'm not!" He rubbed his face. "Maybe I'm seeing things."

"Could it have been a demon?" asked Vivienne. "The Veil here has been terribly battered, after all."

Solas frowned. "What did she look like?"

"Really pale. Long, white hair, white robes."

They stayed quiet. Solas' frown deepened further while Bull and Varric shared a look of what-the-fuck. Vivienne cast the area a wary look.

"Two of them left echoes here," said Cole. "A gift, rewarded for curiosity, from the eldest to the newest. A welcoming."

Solas directed his frown at the halla statue and Lavellan eyed him.

"Let's go get this wyvern heart and get the fuck out of here," said Bull.

They slid off their horses and waited for the draconologists Vivienne had contacted earlier. Lavellan looked back at the statue and at Solas, who was still staring up at it with that specific, impassive expression. Solas had different kinds of impassive expressions, varying depending on the emotion he wished to hide, but this was one Lavellan hadn't seen before.

After the draconologists arrived at camp, Lavellan's team waded through the Fens in search of the wyvern.

During the search, he happened upon a small shrine to Fen'Harel. Who had placed this here? He crouched and eyed the empty basket of offerings.

"A shrine to Fen'Harel," he mused.

Lavellan considered the empty basket, then stood and searched around.

"Inquisitor?" asked Solas.

There! Lavellan plucked the crystal grace from the small shrub and gathered a few more stray wildflowers as he made his way back, ignoring Solas' inquiring look. He placed the flowers in the basket.

"The Dalish would shriek in alarm," said Solas, amused, "at the fact that you would make an

offering.”

“It’s not an offering. That implies reverence,” said Lavellan. “It’s a... greeting.”

“Are you extending a hand of friendship to the Dread Wolf, lethallin?”

Lavellan suppressed his smile as he faced Solas. “Maybe.”

“He may bite your hand.”

“I have another one to sock him in the jaw with if he does.”

Solas looked away but not fast enough because Lavellan still caught him smiling.

“Tries to befriend the god of tricks in his pantheon,” Varric noted. “Are you going to make him a flower crown next?”

“That’s not a terrible idea.”

Varric laughed and they continued.

They finally found the snowy wyvern and made quick work of it, ensured it didn’t suffer unnecessarily, and acquired the help of a few Inquisition soldiers in dragging the carcass back to the draconologists. Lavellan left them to it.

His group was to rest and leave tomorrow, but Vivienne was already packing after she received the heart.

“I am ever so grateful, Inquisitor. Truly. I apologise for my swift departure but this project is time sensitive. I will see you back at Skyhold.”

“The Madame Enchanter flees the moment she acquires what she wants,” said Solas, an undercurrent of hostility shifting beneath the polite outer layer.

“Solas,” Lavellan warned.

He held his tongue, at least until Vivienne and her frosty glare had gone, before he scowled at Lavellan.

“What manner of potion does she seek to make with such a rare ingredient?”

“Potion of youth,” said Lavellan and Solas laughed derisively.

“Driven by vanity. I am unsurprised.”

“It’s not for her.” Lavellan took his boots off and placed them beside the fire basin to dry. “Be gentle, Solas. We don’t know what’s going on.”

“It could be dangerous.”

“Her ambition is not a symptom of malice. She’s not a malicious person.”

“For our sakes, I hope you are correct.”

For a while, they each did their own thing, although Bull squinted around him every so often, wary after Lavellan had spoken of the ghost.

But it wasn't a ghost.

She wasn't...

He looked up, and froze.

There she was again. She beckoned and Lavellan stood, alarmed.

"Glowy?" asked Varric, looking up from tinkering with Bianca.

"Come with me," he bid, already chasing after her. "Quick."

His companions scurried to catch up with him while Lavellan followed her into an elven ruin. Vergala circled the skies and refused to enter. Well, that seemed promising.

The woman was gone by the time they'd entered, but what stood within replaced any disappointment that may have net.

Inside stood a large statue of an archer, not unlike the ones they'd found scattered throughout the Plains, along with three orbs wreathed with iron and crystal around it. More of the spherical metallic tress he'd encountered in the Vir Dirthara littered the place. Pillars rose from the ground. There was a pedestal with a lever and numerous gates by the sides of the room.

"What... the fuck am I looking at?" asked Bull.

"A puzzle," said Lavellan, eyes already gleaming as he inspected the mechanisms.

Solas pulled the side lever and opened one of the gates. Lavellan pulled the other lever in the main room experimentally and the archer rotated by ninety degrees, fired an arrow of blue light. He pulled again. The archer turned another ninety degrees, now aiming at one of the orbs. It shot and the orb lit.

Lavellan grinned at his companions. "Puzzle time," he said.

The puzzle ended up being terrible, confusing, and utterly delightful.

"No, no, keep standing— Why did you move?"

Bull threw his hands up. "I thought I was done."

"Go back and do it again!"

He groaned.

There was confused screaming, a variety of curses thrown about, and delighted cackling. Mostly from Lavellan.

Once they finished the puzzle, Lavellan whooped. Three orbs of light danced ahead and opened the furthest door.

"Hey, uh, dwarf stuck in a room here?" came Varric's tiny voice, still in one of the side rooms where they'd closed the gate on him.

"Oh, shit."

"Did you *forget* me?" he shrieked.

“What? No!” said Lavellan as he set about freeing Varric.

Their reward, apparently, was a Revenant and a bunch of corpses.

Anyway, it was fine. They were fine. It ended up *fine*.

“Why,” asked Solas, mildly puffed after the battle, “do I still follow you whenever you are gripped by an impulsive choice, knowing full well from experience that it will wind up being a harrowing endeavour?”

“Because you adore my company,” said Lavellan, glancing around the empty crypt they'd found themselves in.

Solas grumbled. Lavellan smiled.

Bull wandered back outside. They heard the sliding grate of metal, a heavy drop, then silence.

Then, “Uhh, I’m stuck.”

Varric laughed.

“Please go help the large child,” said Lavellan. “I’ll just dig around for a bit more.”

“Try not to get stuck too, Glowy.”

Solas and Varric left to help Bull and Lavellan’s lips twitched at the yelling that ensued.

Still, why did the woman in white lead him here? There was nothing. This made no sense.

“The puzzle outside seemed like a very Dirthamen thing to do,” said Lavellan. “But whatever this place is, it isn’t for him.”

Ghilan’nain had a presence in the Plains too, didn’t she?

“What did you say?” he asked Cole. “A gift from the eldest to the newest?”

Cole tilted his head, the wide brim of his hat obscuring his eyes, but said nothing.

Eldest... Dirthamen was the eldest child of Mythal and Elgar’nain, and Ghilan’nain had risen to divinity, married Andruil. She was the newest.

A gift! Dirthamen had gifted this land to Ghilan’nain. Maybe even as a wedding present—

A flash of white.

He turned towards it. Stilled.

The woman in white sat perched on one of the ledges, smiling at him, black drip, drip, dripping from blacker lips.

“Ras’virelan,” she greets.

I bow my head. “Ma Venuralas.”

I raise my head and she sets the scalpel she’s holding in her hand down on the table where an assortment of parts rest, unrecognisable from how methodically separated they are. Her laboratory is bright. It’s always bright, lit by the glaring crystals

embedded in the walls and the veins striating the ceiling. No shadows to hide in. A constant spotlight.

Yet she is brighter still. Willowy, deceptively delicate-looking, white as freshly fallen snow. White as bleached bone.

But her eyes are pools of liquid dark, so dark he cannot see her pupils. So dark that the whites of her eyes are jarring. Her lips are black, though not as dark as her eyes.

“I have finished it,” she says with the voice of a gentle bell. “So many materials and samples wasted, so many attempts as it failed. But failure is good. Failure is a step closer to perfection. Do you believe in perfection, Ras’virelan?”

“The notion of perfection differs with each individual.”

She tilts her head, long, white hair high in a bun, but there is always an unhinged, dishevelled look about her. Present in the everlasting glint in her eyes.

“You consider perfection subjective?” she asks.

“I do. Your perfection goes by a different name to mine.”

“What is the name of your perfection then?”

“Dirthamen,” I say.

She blinks in rapid succession, so fast that I only register it as the flutter of snowy lashes.

“No hesitation. Utter loyalty.” She circles me, appraising me with unreserved curiosity as though I am another of her specimens. “I don’t understand. Where is it? Where does your loyalty reside? Is it in your heart? Your head? If I take you apart, will I see it in my hand? Alive and beating?”

She smells metallic. Where are the parts on her table from?

No, I can live without knowing.

My heart thrums. Her dark eyes stare through me.

“All of me is loyalty,” I say.

She smiles, eyes squinting. “Do you cling to him because you are devoted? Or because you are a parasite?”

I frown, though it isn’t from irritation. Rather, genuine curiosity — mirrors hers. As if we are two children faced with the same puzzle from different angles.

“What makes you say that?”

“Answer me first. Why did you come through for him?”

Why? The answer is simple.

“He turns me into art.”

“Art,” she sighs in bliss. “The ascension of self; made and elevated into a transcendent state. But artists err. Surely you know this.”

“So long as he uses me well. And he always does. He knows his tools; he knows what they are best suited for. He knows me.”

She grins. “What a parasitic answer to give.” She walks towards the back of her lab. I follow. “There is an intimacy in being made into a body of work. The barest parts of one another connecting. If he misuses the brush, what then?”

“I ruin him.”

“You think you can, little raven?”

“It is not a matter of can or can’t.”

She opens the display and shows me the armour. Black leather, tight-fitting, but when I brush my fingers over it, it feels warm. Alive. It’s more apt to call it skin than leather.

“It is warm,” she says. “It will always be. Like an embrace. You will feel as if it were your own skin, but better. It moves with you, breathes with you. Every action you take, every breath, it will feel like the warmest embrace. My creations.”

“A simulation of life.”

“For now.” She lets out a delighted sound, stares up with a subdued smile but a mad spark in her eyes. “But I have made life from life. Now I will make life from death.”

“Necromancy?”

“Reanimation of death? That’s not life. Not truly. What I seek is better.” She smudges blood along her cheek as she cradles her face in her sublime thrill. “A reversal of the natural order.”

Lavellan jolted back, disoriented, and Cole righted him. His breathing had turned ragged; hadn’t realised. He blinked, took a while to reorient himself and regain his bearings.

“What was that?” he whispered, turned to Cole, frantic. “She was *there*, she was—”

Not. The room was empty.

“They’re supposed to be dreams,” he said, an edge of panic in his tone. “Or at least, not *here*. Not in front of me.”

Cole shook his head. “Like your ears ringing after a loud noise. She’s not here, not anymore. Your memories made your ears ring.”

“So what? I was seeing things?”

“You’re blurring.”

Lavellan rubbed his face with trembling hands. “What?”

Cole fiddled with his sleeves. “We’re what we think we are. I thought I was a ghost, so I was a

ghost, until Rhys made me real. I stopped haunting, help the hurt.” He looked at Lavellan. “I know who I am. Do you?”

Lavellan looked away.

“Painfully pulling at pieces. You’re what others see you, but how do you see you? You hear it again, the Fade singing, but you don’t know if you should sing back or if you’re just meant to listen.”

Any responses Lavellan could have made, not that he had any, was cut off by a triumphant yell from Bull. The others must have gotten him out.

“Let’s go,” said Lavellan, hugging himself as he looked around one final time.

They left the cave, managing a smile at Bull’s gripes about having been stuck, while Vergala descended back onto his shoulders. He scratched the underside of her beak.

“Are you alright?” he murmured.

She tilted her head, unblinking. She opened her beak.

“[Ar elanan^{\[1\]}](#),” she cawed, her voice a chilling replica of Ghilan’nain’s. Lavellan stopped walking, but his companions continued, unaware he had stopped. “Ar elanan,” she said again. “[Ma enaste tarsul na.^{\[2\]}](#)”

The raven shivers in my arms, bleeding from the numerous cuts along her body. I open my mouth—

“Dead,” Ghilan’nain says without looking up from her work. “The heartbeat is fading, the tissue is far too damaged to be recovered, even with healing magic.”

“If I wanted healing magic, I would have come to a healer.”

Ghilan’nain pauses. She places the needles and sutures down and faces me. Bloodstained hands again. I’ve always expected for her laboratory to smell of death, but there’s only the sting of too-sterile air. The lights are as glaring as always. I feel almost out of place, shrouded in the dark armour she has given me numerous decades ago.

“What do you seek, then?” she asks.

I stare at the dying raven and hum. “Something to push the boundaries.”

She smiles. “I have been prohibited from creating life.”

“You’re not creating life,” I say. “Merely... a reversal of the natural order, was it?”

“Faithful companions can be made immortal, tied to their master’s life.” She runs scarred and knobby fingers over the raven’s crest. “This creature has no attachment to you, nor you to it. Why would you wish to prolong its life?”

“I’m curious.” I tilt my head, regard the raven’s slowing breaths. “And impressed. This one is fierce. I stumbled across her tearing a bear’s face to shreds, pecking at its

eyes. It would be a shame to lose such a creature."

"You are fond of the damaged," she muses and takes the raven from me. "You raise them from the ashes, bring out the strength you see within the wreckage. Is that what you wish for this one?"

"Surprise me," I say and smile. "Are you able to?"

Ghilan'nain cradles the raven. "I can." She glances up at me. "Consider this my favour to you."

"For?"

"Being daring."

Our footsteps echo as we walk down the corridor.

"I will need you for the final part," says Ghilan'nain. "It has been successful, but why stop at just success?"

"Ever the overachiever, ma Venuralas."

We pass a line of vats filled with unknown fluids, then enter a smaller room.

A raven lies sleeping on the table.

"You were right, this one is fierce," she says. "You would do well to earn its loyalty. If the raven were to rebel against the hand which has nurtured it, the damage can be quite severe."

"To itself or its master?"

Ghilan'nain eyes me. "That remains to be seen."

I frown at the answer and glance back at the raven. "So what did you have in mind?"

"What did you have in mind? I have increased its physical and mental attributes, now remains one final box. How will you fill it?"

I run my fingers over the raven's head.

"I need smaller wings," I say and look back at her, meeting her dark eyes. "And a way to return if I am ever broken."

Vergala cawed. Lavellan returned to the present with a start and he stared at her.

Then hugged her. She squawked in surprise.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I made you— I'm sorry." He had seen her only as a tool, in the beginning. Whatever Ghilan'nain had done to her was because of his curiosity and because he had seen something useful. Was that how he had been with the El'amelan? Had he been that kind of man?

Vergala nudged her head against him.

Lavellan held her close as he walked back, sullen.

A way to return if I am ever broken.

He frowned.

Dusk was fast approaching once they returned to camp. Lavellan didn't feel up to spending time in an area that reminded him of Ghilan'nain for now so he said he'd go get kindling.

"Would you like company?" asked Solas.

Lavellan opened his mouth to decline but paused.

"Sure," he said instead.

"We'll get food ready," said Varric. Lavellan nodded and off he and Solas went. Vergala took off and patrolled the skies while they made their way towards the heavily wooded areas of the Plains. For a while, they enjoyed the easy quiet, the give of earth and grass beneath their feet, the dappled dance of dusk-light over their eyes.

"It occurs to me that you've never spoken of your father before," said Solas. Perhaps by way of conversation. "Is there a reason?" His tone was gently probing, a respectful curiosity, a question free to be left alone.

"No reason beyond me not knowing him very well." Lavellan snapped a branch over his knee. "Or never getting the chance to. He died when I was four. I barely recall him."

"Not even stories about him?"

"He was the First from another clan. He and Mae had their respective duties to their own clans so they couldn't be together as they wished."

"Both your parents were mages then," said Solas, mildly surprised. "As is your sister."

Lavellan laughed. "The magic skipped me. It has been known to happen though."

They collected fallen branches, peppering the ensuing quiet with the occasional snapping of larger branches.

"I wonder what you would have been like as a mage," mused Solas, breaking a sizeable branch with his bare hands. Show-off.

Him as a mage, though. He'd wondered too.

"I'd make for a terrible mage," said Lavellan.

"Would you?" asked Solas, tucked the kindling he'd gathered into his arms, and stared at Lavellan, who ignored him in favour of trying to break a stubborn branch with his foot. "You have the qualities of an excellent mage."

"Oh?"

"You are meticulous, keen, with ample curiosity and steadfast willpower. Your indomitable focus is lethal."

Lavellan fought the stubborn branch, pulse flickering. “Indomitable,” he repeated.

Solas’ footsteps crunched. Another snap of wood. “You sound as if you disagree. You should see yourself when you hunt.” There was a touch of awe in his voice. “What would it take to break such focus? I imagine the sight would be fascinating.”

The branch broke beneath Lavellan's foot. His heartbeat was loud in his ears.

“It’s easy to break my focus,” he said and gathered the branches into his arms. “Just wave a box of macarons in my face.”

He smiled. “It seems the Inquisitor has a weakness for sweet treats.”

“Sweet treats that are bad for you in copious amounts,” he snorted.

“Yet you do not heed the danger.”

Lavellan stared at him, gaze briefly flickering up and down in appraisal before he could stop himself. Something in Solas’ gaze sharpened.

“You are what you eat,” said Lavellan. He turned away. “And to answer your earlier question, I’d make for a terrible mage because I have a feeling I’ll push boundaries.”

And he *had*, back in Elvhenan. There were faint memories of a vague hungering for knowledge, and his arsenal had been filled with a sundry of spells — offensive, defensive, both, neither, and the absolutely useless except in specific occasions.

“I do not see the problem,” said Solas.

Lavellan smiled at him. “You wouldn’t. I suspect everyone else would be less inclined to agree.”

“You would have flourished in Elvhenan.” Something indiscernible shimmered in his eyes.

“I would have been a slave,” he gently reminded.

That brought Solas up short. He bowed his head. “Then you would have been a slave coveted by many.”

“That’s not any better.”

“I never said it was.” A hard edge crept into his voice. “You do not yield easily. Many would have enjoyed the challenge of breaking you.”

“They would have failed.”

“I know.”

Why were they having this conversation?

I yield to one man only.

Lavellan stopped at the thought.

“They have no authority over me.”

“Only me?”

“Only you.”

The voices curled, faded. The branches dug into Lavellan’s chest as he tightened his hold. Solas was looking at him. Lavellan didn’t meet his eyes.

“We should have enough kindling. Let’s go back,” said Lavellan.

They walked back in another silence, but Solas was still eyeing him.

“Have I angered you?” asked Solas.

Lavellan shook his head. “It’s not you.”

“The ghost, then?”

“I think I was just tired,” he lied. “There was no ghost. Besides, ghost sightings are usually just spirits.”

Lavellan wasn’t looking but he could feel Solas frowning. They returned to camp and set the kindling and firewood down.

Varric told them a story over dinner and Lavellan laughed along during the appropriate parts, but his current company was irritatingly perceptive, so he had a feeling nobody was buying it. No one mentioned anything though.

After dinner, Varric and Bull settled into a conversation, Cole content to listen. Lavellan wandered the area and gathered some flowers, then settled near the fire and worked on making a flower crown just to keep his hands and mind busy. Vergala rested on his lap and helped him braid parts of the crown.

Solas sat beside Lavellan, but he said nothing. He merely opened his field journal and wrote new notes into it under the light of his magic. Lavellan glanced at him.

“I will not ask,” said Solas. “But I am here.”

Lavellan’s heart clenched. He smiled in thanks.

A comfortable silence passed, embellished by the crackling fire, the scratch of Solas’ quill, and Bull and Varric’s faint conversation. Something about Varric writing about Bull’s muscles? Lavellan snorted every now and again while he eavesdropped.

Lavellan and Vergala finished the flower crown.

“Are you going to make him a flower crown next?” Varric had asked.

He glanced at Solas.

And put it on his head.

Solas stopped writing.

Lavellan grinned. “You’re not allowed to take it off. Inquisitor’s orders.” Vergala cawed. “And

Vergala.”

“Ah, well, who am I to refuse?” asked Solas, smiling.

“Can I get one?” Bull asked.

“No, I’m out of flowers.”

“This is clearly favouritism,” Varric complained.

“This is me running out of resources.”

“It’s fine.” Varric faked weeping and wiped a tear away. Lavellan rolled his eyes. “We understand. Solas is your favourite.”

“Keep that up and he will be,” said Lavellan.

Solas chuckled.

Bull and Varric eventually folded for the night while Vergala played with Cole. Solas was still writing beside him.

“Hey Solas?” he asked, watching Vergala. Solas hummed in response. “Can a spirit possess an animal?”

Solas paused his writing and looked up at him. “Is this about your raven?”

“Yes.”

“You suspect she is possessed by a spirit.”

“I don’t know. I’m just entertaining options, I guess.”

“Possession occurs when the host’s will is overridden or bypassed. Possession can also be peaceful; a merging with a consenting host. Although at that stage, I would not call it possession.” Solas closed his journal. “Animals are difficult to tempt, and being forceful takes a great amount of energy on the spirit’s part, thus, animals are not prone to being possessed. However, spirits can take the form of animals, provided the spirit has the personality and will to remain intact in this realm.”

Lavellan frowned. No, none of those sounded right.

“But if Vergala were possessed or is a spirit who has taken form,” Solas continued, “we would have realised by now. It is possible that she really is just a very intelligent raven.”

“She knows Elvish,” said Lavellan. “She was able to translate a Common word into Elvish.”

“Which is?”

“Veredhe. Mayhem.”

“Has she translated any other words? It is possible that she has just connected the Common word to its Elvish counterpart.”

“Maybe,” Lavellan mumbled, unconvinced. What had Ghilan’nain done to her? What had Lavellan done after? He shook his head. “I think I’ll go sleep now. Will you stay up?”

“Not for much longer.”

Lavellan nodded and stretched, bid him good night, and returned to his tent, eyeing the halla statue on the way. He curled up in his bedroll, mind firing with questions that flitted by too fast for him to make them out.

He slept and dreamt. Faint impressions, nothing concrete.

Severe golden eyes, a silver crown with three prongs.

“Take care, Isha’belsal’in. You may be the most powerful within Dirthamen’s court, but there is only so much protection he can grant you.”

Lavellan startled awake to Solas shaking him.

The distress gleaming in Solas’ eyes chased Lavellan’s lethargy away.

“Solas?” The light was subdued outside. Early morning light.

“I require your help,” said Solas, tone edged with urgency. “It is a friend of mine. They are in danger.”

Lavellan’s stomach dropped.

“They have been captured by mages and forced into slavery.”

Chapter End Notes

Solas may have a flower crown as a treat for his communication attempts last chapter.

Listen. Ghilan'nain is TERRIFYING. Did you hear abt all that shit in Tevinter Nights??? And do you remember that armour set you find in Trespasser? With the spooky armour that hugs you too tight and the belt that always tightens no matter how loose you buckle it and the necklace that always has condensation on its surface? And the codex entries accompanying each piece in the set was just creepy af.

(Hey Ras, what the FUCK. What'd you and Ghilly do to Vergala)

Translation

[1] **Ar elanan:** I can^[1]

[2] **Ma enaste tarsul na:** My favour to you^[1]

Message of passing

Chapter Notes

shorter chapter than usual because that's just how the scene unfolded and i like where/how the chapter ends

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

in mournful hyacinth fields—

How could Lavellan have forgotten?

“Do you know where?” asked Lavellan.

“Yes. I got a sense of my friend’s location before I awoke. Nearby.”

Lavellan hurried out of the bedroll. “Let’s go.”

If Lavellan’s rush surprised Solas, he didn’t show it. Or perhaps he was too preoccupied to notice.

“Up, up, everyone up!” Lavellan ordered.

His companions peered out their tents groggily, but when they saw Solas and Lavellan’s harried expressions, they geared up without question.

“What happened?” Lavellan asked, strapping his vambraces on.

“We were conversing when my friend was abruptly pulled from the Fade,” said Solas, eyes hard as he put on his coat. “And I heard the call for help shortly after.”

Lavellan’s heart thundered. There was still a chance that Wisdom would remain uncorrupted then. They had to hurry.

They got on their horses and rode.

Lavellan clutched the reins tight, gritting his teeth.

How could he have forgotten?

A bright flash in the distance. Screams. An explosion. Ringing of metal. The noises startled the horses and they halted, backed away with nervous nickers.

Solas cursed and slid off his horse, breaking out into a sprint.

“Solas—!” Lavellan hurriedly dismounted and raced across the field in pursuit, the stream burbling beside them. They ran up a small hillside and paused once they reached the top.

A small group of mages were defending against bandits, outnumbered two to one, but Solas’ focus was on the magic circle pulsing in the near distance with an emerald spirit caught within it.

“My friend,” whispered Solas, voice breaking. He took his staff out and extended it, rushed towards Wisdom.

“Help the mages with the bandits,” Lavellan told the others. “I’ll go help Solas.”

They unsheathed their weapons, Varric’s crossbow clicking as he removed the guard. Bull led the charge towards the bandits. Lavellan went after Solas.

One of the mages stopped Solas before he could reach the circle, gesticulating frantically while Solas yelled back. *Oh no.*

“Do you even know what kind of spirit you have summoned?” asked Solas.

“We just needed it to fight for a short time—”

“It is a spirit of *Wisdom*,” Solas exploded. “And it can become corrupted into *Pride* if you force it to go against its nature. It is not a fighter.” There was a heat to his words, an undercurrent of bitter resignation, and Lavellan’s chest tightened.

“*He wants to give wisdom, not orders,*” Cole had once said. Solas was watching his friend go through what he had.

Solas tried to sidestep the mage. “I do not have time for this.”

The mage pointed his staff at Solas. Lavellan closed the distance in a flash and pressed his dagger against the mage’s neck. The rune on his dagger pulsed red.

“Put,” Lavellan said calmly, “the staff down. If this cuts into you, it’ll burn like hell.”

The mage stared at him, paling. He lowered the staff. Lavellan lifted the dagger and stepped back.

“Undo the binding,” Solas said, eyes flashing with murderous intent.

The mage sputtered. “We can’t do that!”

“Can’t as in you refuse to, or can’t as in you don’t have the skill to?” asked Lavellan.

“We— We don’t know how to.”

Solas released a derisive breath. “Of course you don’t! How fitting.”

Wisdom shrieked. A pained and tortured sound.

Solas frantically shouldered past the mage. “Move!”

The mage trailed after him in protest. Lavellan glanced at the other mages and the bandits, but Bull, Cole, and Varric had a handle on it. They’d be finished soon.

He followed Solas to the magic circle instead, the ambient magic growing thick around them. Constricting. The jagged pillars situated at the cardinal points of the circle pulsed green.

Wisdom was in the middle, curled in on itself, looking far too solid.

Green lightning streaked from the pillars and struck it. It cried out again. A torn breath escaped Solas.

“Wisdom is fighting,” Solas said, voice thin. “Fighting to remain as Wisdom. We must break the summoning circle. No circle, no orders to fight, no conflict with its nature.”

“That can be dangerous!” protested the mage.

“My friend merely wishes to be freed and to return to the Fade.”

“Friend? You can’t be friends with a—”

“Shut,” said Solas, “up.”

Lavellan eyed the pillars. “Those pillars are the conduits, right? I’ve studied this kind of ritual with my sister before.” He apologised mentally to Ellana for using her as an excuse again. “If we break them, the summoning circle loses magical integrity.”

“We can’t,” said Solas, teeth gritted. Lavellan’s whirring thoughts halted.

“What?”

“The pillars are tethering Wisdom to both the Fade and the physical realm. If we break it—” He closed his eyes. “Wisdom will lose its connection to the Fade. Compounded with the stress from being unwillingly pulled into this world, it will shatter and die.”

But— But that was how they had freed Wisdom!

“It worked before,” Lavellan said, uncomprehending. “With— My sister and I freed the spirit.”

“Was the spirit already corrupted?” Solas asked, morose.

“I— Yes. But it became a spirit again and then...” Lavellan looked down. “And then died. But I thought it died because it’d been corrupted already.”

Solas’ shoulders slumped. “All that has done is remove the orders given to the spirit. You have freed it, but its death was already inescapable.”

Lavellan stared at him, eyes wide.

“So... what now?” Lavellan asked, his heart in his throat. “Do you know how to undo it?”

Solas inspected the circle, then shook his head, shooting the mage a sharp look. “This kind of circle can only be undone by the caster.”

There had to be *something*.

Lavellan stared at his left hand.

“What if Wisdom can retain a connection to the Fade?” Lavellan asked. Solas looked at him.

“It is still bound here.”

“When I open sunders, it tries to pull you back into the Fade. Do you think it can simulate that connection?”

Solas furrowed his brows in thought. “It may. Possibly.”

“I can keep one open above Wisdom while the others work on breaking the pillars. After that, no

more conflicting orders so no more threat of corruption.”

“Opening sunders hurts you.”

Lavellan smiled wryly. “Well, you’d all better be quick then.”

Footsteps approached behind them, then stopped. The others must have defeated the bandits.

Another strike of lightning. Another agonised cry from Wisdom. Solas’ expression fell.

“Shit,” whispered Varric behind them.

“Solas, we’re running out of time,” said Lavellan.

“I—” He closed his eyes and let out a breath. “The ambient magic is thick and may interfere. You will have to step into the circle and stay close to Wisdom. We will test first if the sunder can successfully simulate a tether.”

Lavellan turned to his companions. “There’s no time to explain, but you see those pillars? I need you to break them once we give the clear.”

“No magic needed for that, right?” asked Varric.

“I will interrupt the magical current so that you can break it,” said Solas. “But I will not be able to cast any other spells while doing so.” He gave Lavellan a meaningful glance. “I cannot ease the pain that the Anchor will cause.”

“I’ll be fine. Just— Hurry.”

Lavellan eyed the edge of the magic circle, took a deep breath, and stepped into it. The shift in ambient magic was immediate. He sucked in a sharper breath as his skin suddenly felt too tight, as the walls of his lungs shuddered, as something within him shrunk into itself. The Well of Sorrows’ murmurings became muffled. There was a whisper of something else, a call to violence, but it was dismissible enough.

Maybe he should have considered how this would impact the spirit part of him.

He hurried to Wisdom’s side and knelt. Creators, this ambient magic was heavy and draining.

His breaths echoed in his ears.

Wisdom raised its head, its too-solid form reaching for him. He reached back and grasped its hand. Her hand. The whispers of her face were twisted in hurt. She smelled of spilled ink and ruins soaked by rain.

“Change,” she gasped.

He held her close and raised his hand, the Anchor flaring.

“Hold on,” he soothed, his voice coming out thick. “Just a while longer. Solas is here.”

He opened a sunder above them and held Wisdom tighter as if he could keep her together that way. The sting pricked at his palms. Bearable for now.

The Fade pulled at them. Wisdom clung onto him, burying her face into his coat, a green thread of magic coiling between her and the sunder.

“Are you still tethered to the Fade?” he asked.

She nodded weakly and hope pooled in his chest.

“It’s working!” he yelled. “Go!”

Solas slammed his staff down and intercepted the summoning circle’s magical flow. The ambient magic around them lightened somewhat and the Veil rippled.

The fire lit in his veins. Lavellan breathed through it.

“Are you okay?” he asked Wisdom.

“It is loud,” she whimpered. “Telling me to kill.”

The pain gnawed at his bones, threaded electricity through it. His muscles seized up. A strangled sound churned at the back of his throat. The Fade was pulling at him too, making it difficult to move.

Bull roared as he and Cole hacked away at a pillar and Varric shot explosive bolts at another. The ambient magic shuddered.

His entire skin felt as if it were full of boiling water.

“Oh gods,” he whispered to himself, scrunching his watering eyes shut.

One pillar broke. Wisdom’s form stopped being too solid, her hair wisping around her jaw.

He let out a yell if only to give the pain an outlet.

The pain. It reminded him of all the nights he’d whimpered and sobbed to himself, gripping his arm as his cold and empty bedroom filled with the emerald light of the Anchor.

Wisdom tugged at him. “You must stop! You cannot hold this open for long. Your arm—”

Another pillar broke. The emerald light of her form turned more vibrant.

“Hurry!” came Solas’ voice.

“We’re trying!”

Lavellan swayed. Wisdom supported him.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, it hurts, it hurts—

“You have to stop!” cried Wisdom.

“I’m not letting you die,” he managed to grit out.

“Stop!”

The pain scorched its way up to his jaw.

Lavellan bowed his head, searching for *anything* else to focus on. He could smell the sweet lightning of magic.

He hummed his mother’s lullaby shakily.

Endure, endure.

“Change, that’s enough.” Wisdom cradled his face. He looked into her eyes aglow with emerald, the whispers of her face pulled in worry. “Enough.”

“No,” he said, voice quivering and choked.

Another pillar broke. One left. Last one. He just had to hold on until then.

The edges of Wisdom’s form were softening even further, and she looked as though she could tangle within the summer winds.

“Enough,” she said again. “You need not put yourself through this.”

His expression crumbled and the tears that had been pricking at his eyes fell. “He needs you.”

“We must all say our farewells.” She smiled gently. “He will have memories of me, and once the pain eases, they will give him comfort instead.”

“Last one,” he said, almost feverishly. “I just need— One. It’s one.”

His vision flickered. The Well of Sorrows roared in his ears and he grimaced.

“Almost there, Mercy!” yelled Bull.

“You are concentrating far too much potent magic within one area,” said Wisdom. The Anchor flashed erratically, sent pulses of pain each time. Lavellan cried out. “You will exacerbate its condition prematurely.”

Memories of the chronic, often excruciating pain he’d had to weather for three years returned. Gods, he couldn’t do that again.

But he only had a few more seconds left to endure.

“Just a bit more,” he said. At least, that was what he thought he’d said. He couldn’t think past the scorching waves of lightning.

The Anchor flared. The sunder above them gave a low, whining sound.

The Veil snapped around his hand.

“Thank you,” whispered Wisdom. “Please take care of him.”

She slipped from his grasp and clasped her hands over his, forced his fingers to close, wrapped herself around it.

His heart sank. The hope that had pooled in his chest turned stagnant.

“Wait—!”

Wisdom severed her connection to the Fade. The sunder closed.

“No!”

The last pillar broke.

Light exploded and blinded them.

Lavellan flinched away from it and scrunched his eyes shut, the brightness flooding behind his eyelids. The Veil electrified.

The light eventually faded back into the soft lights of early morning. Lavellan opened his eyes.

Wisdom was slumped on the ground ahead of him, her light dimming. Lavellan staggered up. His left hand flared with both pain and light and he stumbled, gripped his arm at the elbow. The entire arm prickled. Too warm. He removed his glove and found that his hand was covered in a web of green lightning. Rolling his sleeves up revealed the same thing.

He fell to his knees beside her.

“Why?” he croaked out. “It was close.”

Wisdom struggled to raise her head, but she still found the energy to smile. “It was. For you. A second more and it would have been a point of no return.”

His eyes watered again.

Solas rushed towards them, knelt beside Wisdom and gently lifted her up so she could lean against him. He looked lost.

“I— I do not understand,” said Solas. “You— You are fading. I do not understand.”

Her light dimmed further. The edges of her trailed away like the flags of a defeated nation fluttering in the breeze of war’s aftermath. She closed her eyes, still smiling. “I am free, and I am me. That is all that matters.”

Solas’ gaze fell on Lavellan’s arm and his eyes widened in understanding.

“You stopped him,” said Solas.

“I am at peace,” said Wisdom. “Will you guide me into death?”

Solas bowed his head. Lavellan looked up at the sky in defeat, drained, cradling his arm. The skin was too raw. Even the breeze stung.

“[Ma nuvenin^{\[1\]}](#),” said Solas as he raised his head, eyes lined with sorrow.

Wisdom pressed their foreheads together. “[Ma ane tel'sasha^{\[2\]}](#),” she murmured. “[Tel'asama em la tumarin, y la lea^{\[3\]}](#).”

Solas exhaled shakily and held her hands. His magic wrapped around her, comforting and gentle, and Wisdom closed her eyes.

With a contented sigh, she faded with the wind.

“*Thank you*,” her voice echoed in Lavellan’s head.

The silence fell. Lavellan hung his head and clenched his jaw.

“Now I must endure,” Solas whispered to himself. He placed a careful hand over the one Lavellan had gripped his injured arm with. “Show me.”

Lavellan hesitated, then slowly pulled his left arm out of his coat, hissing as it brushed against the

fabric. Solas inhaled sharply.

The skin was red and the green lightning had invaded up to his biceps. Lavellan swallowed back a small whimper. It looked too similar to when it had begun to worsen four years ago. He'd worn gloves and long sleeves then, if only to hide it from the others. Lavellan had held some scrap of hope that it would go away on its own, but a larger part of him had known he was dying.

Solas touched the skin. Lavellan flinched at the arc of pain that shot up his arm. Solas frowned in concentration and ran glowing hands over Lavellan's arm. It took a few minutes, but the green lightning eventually faded and the magic soothed the skin.

"Can you move your fingers?" asked Solas.

Lavellan clenched and unclenched his hand, wiggled his fingers. His skin still felt strange, as if it had been pulled too tight over the bone, but it was no longer painful. He could breathe.

"I'm sorry," Lavellan whispered.

"No, never. Not— No. This was not your fault. This was not anybody's fault." He glanced up and his eyes sharpened. "Except theirs."

Solas rose, gaze dark and murderous. The air around him bristled with barely bridled magic.

The group of mages cowered.

"You," said Solas, took a menacing step forward, "tortured and killed my friend."

"We— We were travelling on the road," stammered the mage, "and it was far too dangerous to travel unprotected. You saw the bandits—"

"Your incompetence has cost a life."

Lavellan forced himself to stand, ignoring the weakness and fatigue of his entire body.

Solas raised his hand, lightning sparking and gathering in his palms.

Lavellan grabbed Solas' hand. "Solas, no."

He shot Lavellan an incredulous look. "*No? They killed my friend.*"

"And I'm sorry, truly, I am. But killing them isn't going to accomplish anything."

"It will certainly ensure that they do not get others killed with their incompetence."

Lavellan tightened his grip around Solas' hand. "Inquisitor's orders. No."

Solas' look turned heated but Lavellan kept his calm.

"You," Solas said, "have chosen the most inopportune time to flaunt your authority and display your merciful streak." He ripped his hand out of Lavellan's and turned on his heel, walked away.

He grabbed Solas' sleeve before he could stop himself, panic clawing up his throat. "Wait," he said, cursed at how his voice cracked.

Solas' gaze softened as he looked back at him. "I wish to be alone. Before I unjustly lay the blame at your feet and say something I will regret. Please, let me go."

Lavellan forced his fingers to open. Solas closed his eyes and took a calming breath, then turned and walked away without another word, left them choking in the icy silence. Lavellan sighed to himself and turned to the mages. There were five of them. Two of them were elderly.

“If you would like sanctuary, I have an offer,” said Lavellan, exhausted. “South of here, into the Emerald Graves, there’s a group of Orlesian refugees. Speak to their leader, Fairbanks, and tell them Mahanon has asked if you can stay with them. At least until you get your shit together. If you don’t know the way, I can ask one of the Inquisition scouts to get you there.”

“We can’t send them to Skyhold?” asked Varric.

Bull made a noise. “You think Solas would like that? If you put the people who killed his friend in the same space as him...” He shrugged. “Well, Skyhold’s big and Mercy can’t be everywhere to stop him from making fireworks.”

“I’m not throwing you to the wolves,” said Lavellan to the mages. “Leaving you to fend for yourselves or making you go to Skyhold will be doing just that. Fairbanks is your safest option. Just— go. Let this serve as a lesson to all of you. Don’t mess with spirits if you have no idea what you’re playing with. They have wills of their own.”

The mages shuffled. They all looked so haggard.

“Think about it. If you wish to accept, walk east and you’ll find an Inquisition camp. Tell them the Inquisitor wishes to send you to Fairbanks.” He turned and nodded at his companions. “Let’s... get back to camp.”

They returned to their horses and rode back.

Upon return, everyone stared at each other, uncertain and subdued.

“You think he’ll come back?” Varric asked.

“He will,” mumbled Lavellan. “I just don’t know when.”

“Alright, why don’t we wait until tomorrow? If Chuckles isn’t here by then, we’ll go back to Skyhold and just leave a letter?”

Lavellan nodded, hands clenching by his sides. Last time, Solas hadn’t returned for days. Lavellan had pored over book after book about spirits and their deaths in his distress. He’d thought Solas wouldn’t ever come back.

Varric and Bull said something about getting breakfast and Lavellan couldn’t remember if he’d nodded or not. He sat against the base of the halla statue and rested his head against the stone, absentmindedly rubbing his arm. Cole sat beside him. They watched the clouds.

“She stopped me. We could have—” Lavellan closed his eyes.

“Terrible twisting, tearing himself apart. Change spirits never know when to stop,” said Cole, adopting a slightly exasperated tone. He shook his head, tone returning to normal. “She knew it was time. She and him have had a lot of time together, but he still has memories to make with you. He’ll be alright. She can rest because he’ll be okay.”

Lavellan looked away. Everything in him was sore. “He’s not okay at the moment though. Could you try to find him please? Just... make sure he’s alright.”

Cole was silent for a moment, then he nodded and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The day wore on, but Solas didn't return. Lavellan's apologies crescendoed in his head along with the mantra of, "Please be alright."

Cole returned around midday.

"He wants to be alone," said Cole.

Lavellan deflated. "Right, yeah, that's fair."

"I told him you're waiting, but you'll leave if he makes you wait too long."

He stared at Cole.

"He knows what I mean." With that, Cole wandered off and left Lavellan to blink at his retreating back. Lavellan chewed on his lip and slunk back into his tent. He was still aching everywhere.

He slept undisturbed for most of the day.

Once he awoke, night had already fallen. Lavellan shambled out of the tent, hope in his throat, but Solas still wasn't back.

"Hey Mercy," greeted Bull, sitting by the fire with Varric and Cole. "How you feeling? We've got food if you're hungry."

Lavellan sat with them, pulled his knees up to his chest. "Arm doesn't hurt any more. Not hungry though. Did Solas...?"

Varric shook his head.

"Ah."

Varric and Bull tried to distract him with stories and anecdotes, but the atmosphere was too funereal for it.

They eventually retreated for the night but Lavellan was still wide awake from his nap. He was drawn back to the base of the halla statue so he sat there, tipped his head back to rest against it, and watched the stars.

He buried his head in his hands, pulled at his hair.

He'd forgotten. Something this important to Solas and he'd forgotten. He could have done... *something*. Could have cleared the area entirely of bandits when they were last here so that the mages wouldn't have felt the need to summon a spirit in defence.

Lavellan had let his pain overshadow too much.

"But it does that," said Cole, suddenly beside him. "Hurt is loud, and there's too much. You can't remember them all. You're only one."

Lavellan didn't answer.

They sat together in complete silence but Lavellan's thoughts didn't spiral as he'd expected them to. He glanced at Cole. He was cupping a dark clump of smoke pulsing with blue.

"Is that mine?" asked Lavellan.

"Yes." He closed his hands over it and the smoke drifted through the spaces of his fingers, dissipated. "If it's not tangled and it won't help, I take it."

Lavellan found himself smiling. "I'm glad you're here, Cole."

"Me too." He looked up at the stars and pointed at one constellation. "That one's the ship?"

His smile widened slightly. "Right."

That was how they ended up passing the time, until Lavellan's drowsiness returned and he ended up nodding off.

He dreamt again.

White hair swayed, dark eyes liquid.

She smiled. "You and I, they fear us."

"They fear us in different ways."

"No. They fear us because we see more than they'd like. They don't like it when we see. They don't like it when we use that to create."

"I destroy."

"And in so doing, create. But are you creating something within the world or within yourself?" Ghilan'nain made a clean, deep, and large incision down the middle of the doe struggling on her table. Black pooled. The struggles stopped. "It's hard being Change. You need to keep moving. But moving too much unravels you. You decay in the chaos of the aftermath."

The black slipped over the table edge and dripped onto the floor.

"Interesting, isn't it?" she asked. "Entropy. The tail to Change. Always following, always a part of you, close behind."

He smiled at her. "Or is it a second head?"

Ghilan'nain reached into the doe. "You're becoming more aware of yourself."

He stayed quiet. The crack of ligaments and snap of bone filled the air.

"Good," she said. "Questioning is good."

"Aren't you supposed to discourage that?"

"Why? Ask. Question. Always. They will make you stop. Never stop. Keep asking, keep pushing." She ripped something out. "Until you hold the heart of the matter in your hands." She presented the doe heart. He took it. It weighed almost nothing.

"It's light," he said.

"Because it's not true."

"Are you true?"

“No truer than you. And you become truer every day. It is a dangerous thing when the scalpel recognises it is gripped by a hand connected to an arm connected to a person. A person who is you. You were your own weapon all along.”

The heart crumbled into white ash.

“Blood can only reach so far,” said Ghilan’nain. “We are more than our tethers.”

“I unravel without mine.”

“Unravel? Or evolve?”

The white ash slipped between the spaces of his fingers. The doe on the table convulsed, spilled ash from the incision—

Lavellan jolted awake at the sound of footsteps, heart thundering.

Was that a memory or a dream? An amalgamation of both?

He glanced beside him, but Cole was gone.

The footsteps stopped in front of him. Lavellan looked up instead and met Solas’ eyes, dark grey in the dim, and his thundering heart faltered.

“Why are you outside?” asked Solas, eyes so tired. The skin beneath them looked irritated, as if it had been rubbed aggressively.

“I was waiting for you.” His heart echoed in his ears. Solas had returned. Early, at that. “How are you?”

Solas glanced away. “I may have carved a new hole into a hillside.” He held himself tight and careful, every action and word measured as if he were water about to spill over the lip of its container.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

He met Lavellan’s eyes again. “It hurts,” he said. “It always does. But I will survive.” Even as he said it, the words were controlled, held by a fraying thread.

Lavellan stood, crossed the distance in two long strides, and pulled Solas close and held him in his arms. Solas tensed but Lavellan knew it was more a shock at the touch than true revulsion. He cradled the back of Solas’ head and guided it down to rest over Lavellan’s shoulders.

“It’s okay,” Lavellan reassured. “You’re not alone.”

Solas’ next breath sounded punched. The next shuddered. And the next was a soft sob.

His hands rested on Lavellan’s waist, gripping the fabric of Lavellan’s tunic tight. He angled his head towards Lavellan’s neck as if hiding from the world and Lavellan held him tighter, shielding him. The world had no business seeing this. He held Solas through his silent sobs.

I’m so sorry.

Solas didn’t allow himself to weep for long, but he lingered in the embrace. Lavellan smelled the sweet lightning of his magic. Remnants of it.

After a while, Solas raised his head, looking worn and battered, smudged tears shimmering on his cheeks and lashes. Lavellan pulled him towards the long-dead fire.

“Here, sit,” directed Lavellan and sat Solas down.

Lavellan grabbed two cloths and a basin from his tent and filled that with clean water. He dipped one cloth in the basin and wrung out the water, held the back of Solas’ head, and gently wiped away the tears.

“Mamae used to do this whenever we cried,” said Lavellan, passing the cloth over Solas’ eyelids, down his cheeks, beneath his nose. “The cold water soothes, and the repetitive motions are calming.”

Solas stared at him through it but Lavellan focused on the task.

“I apologise for ruining your tunic,” Solas said, raw and thick from tears.

Lavellan snorted and grabbed a dry cloth. “I’ve ruined a fair share of yours.” He patted Solas’ face dry and smiled after. “There.”

He folded the cloths. Solas whispered something beneath his breath.

“Hm?” asked Lavellan.

Solas smiled. It was faint and brittle, but it was sincere. “Nothing.”

They settled in the new quiet.

“Where did you go?” asked Lavellan as he packed the cloths away.

“I considered visiting the place in the Fade where my friend and I would frequently converse.” He looked down at his hands on his lap. “But I cannot weather it just yet.”

Once Lavellan had nothing left to fiddle with, he settled beside Solas.

“I had a thought that you may not return,” Lavellan admitted.

“I could hardly abandon you now.”

“I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

“I would have.”

Lavellan lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

Solas shook his head. “It is I who must apologise. I should have... The Anchor, it— I should have known that abusing it may have risked your—” He cut himself off.

Lavellan stared. He didn’t ask Solas about the Anchor and its life-threatening effects, now wasn’t the time, but he still placed weight in his silence and made it a message of its own.

We’ll be addressing this later.

“What if I went with you?” Lavellan offered instead. “Into the Fade where you and your friend used to converse. If that’s something you’d like. And this might sound like a silly question but... are there any rites for a spirit’s passing? A way to remember them?”

“It is not a silly question, and I appreciate that you thought to ask,” he said. “A spirit’s death is not the same as a mortal’s. Its energy returns to the Fade, and if the idea giving the spirit form is strong, or if the memory has shaped other spirits, it may someday rise again.”

“But it’s not the same,” Lavellan whispered.

“No,” he whispered back. Solas held out his hand. Lavellan rested his over it. “But I think your presence will provide me with the courage to face this.”

“I think you have the courage to face this regardless,” said Lavellan. “But you shouldn’t have to grieve alone.”

“It’s been some time since I had the option of not being alone in my mourning.” He grasped Lavellan’s hand. “It’s been so long since I could trust someone.”

Something tight tangled in Lavellan’s chest as he stared at their joined hands. The weight off all his secrets pressed in on him. They were no longer on his shoulders; they’d become a part of him, like cobwebs in the chambers of his heart.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to trust me,” murmured Lavellan. “I’m sure you know I’m hiding things.”

“I believe the situation is the same on your end.”

“You still want to trust me?”

“Again, I reflect that question back at you.”

Lavellan laughed softly to himself. “I guess we’re both idiots.”

Solas smiled. “Quite.”

He returned Solas’ smile with a wry one of his own. “Shall we go to where you and your friend would converse?”

They stood and slipped into their tent, let go of each other’s hands if only so they could settle into their respective bedrolls, then faced each other once again. Lavellan reached for Solas’ hand between them. Solas took it. Lavellan closed his eyes, focused on their soft breaths, the warmth gathering between their palms.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing on a hillside overlooking a field of purple hyacinths. The clouds in the sky held soft shades of pastel and the wind carried the soothing yet indiscernible whispers of a lost song.

His hand was warm. Solas’ hand was still in his.

Solas led him to the shade of a lone tree by the hillside. It flowered, vibrant and pink.

They sat. Said nothing at all. Lavellan offered his presence as a simple constant, and side by side, they stayed.

“Thank you,” Solas whispered as a breeze rolled past.

Lavellan squeezed his hand in response.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has gone through FOUR rewrites before I was finally pleased with it. I hope you enjoyed <3

Lavellan: I know how to fix this!

Solas: well yes but no

Lavellan: windows xp error sound

Also, chapters are going to be shorter from now on (around 3-4k words) if only to lighten the workload on my end. To compensate, I'll update twice a week. So Monday/Thursday deal again. You'd still get the same amount of content in a week. This way, I'm just breaking it up for myself and my proofreader (and possibly you if you get daunted by the word count every update, apologies lmao)

So next update is Thursday, and from then on, Mon + Thurs.

Translation

[1] **Ma nuvenin:** As you wish^[1]

[2] **Ma ane tel'sasha:** You are not alone^[1]

[3] **Tel'asama em la tumarin, y la lea:** Carry me not as a weight, but as a light^[1]

A call for home

Chapter Notes

"So next update is Thursday, and from then on, Mon + Thurs."



My beta was busy so this hasn't been proofread. But since I'm a Grade A Impatient Bitch, double updates start a week earlier than what I'd said.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

and home's bid for truth—

The weeks passed by in a blur of responsibilities. Besides attending to his duties as Inquisitor, Lavellan also kept an eye on Solas, made sure he ate and slept properly since he'd been burying himself in work and neglecting to take care of himself.

Vivienne had also sent a letter back to inform Lavellan that she would remain in Orlais for a while to organise Duke Bastien's funeral and manage the political implications of his death.

But still no news about his clan.

On top of everything else, Lavellan's homesickness returned with a vengeance.

He would wear the gifts that he'd received from Clan Venalin to alleviate some of it, the Dalish scarves and halla bone amulet on full display, Revasha's hunting charm around his wrist. That way, he'd feel closer to home. Closer to reclaiming himself. It helped, but it still wasn't enough.

His restlessness had returned as well. Maybe it was from the stress or the homesickness... or something else. Ever since their return from the Exalted Plains, something within him had become agitated, shifting beneath his skin. His left arm was fine now, so it likely wasn't the Anchor's doing. He couldn't put a name to whatever was causing his agitation.

He groaned to himself and shifted in his bed, turned his pillow to the cool side for about the sixth time that night, then turned again to stare at the ceiling.

Restlessness on top of homesickness. His room felt too empty. He'd placed the blankets from Clan Venalin over his bed but that only made him miss home more. He missed sleeping in close quarters within the clan, missed the aravels placed beside each other, missed the warm nights where they'd unfurl their bedrolls beneath the stars.

He grumbled and got up, wrapped Clan Venalin's blankets around him, and descended into the Great Hall. The cold stones were a shock to his bare feet, but he soon got used to it. He made his way to the Hall's upper balcony.

Even chillier out here. He wrapped the blankets tighter around him and leaned his elbows on the railing. Skyhold was quiet, asleep. A few guards were patrolling the battlements while the tavern still glowed with a soft light.

Soft footsteps approached, familiar.

"Hello," said Lavellan.

"Why are you still up?"

"My room felt empty."

Solas stood beside him, staring off into the distance, a million thoughts shimmering behind his eyes.

"You stayed up late again," said Lavellan.

"My sleep feels empty."

Lavellan shuffled closer to him and draped the blanket over them both.

"How are you?" asked Lavellan.

Solas looked down, clutching his portion of the blanket tighter around him. "The hurt has dulled. No less painful, but it is not so overwhelming any more. I visited the hyacinth fields and found energy stirring there. One day, another spirit of Wisdom may arise from it."

"Then I hope that one day, that spirit touches a life as much as Wisdom has touched yours." A breeze ruffled his hair.

"I sincerely hope so, too." He looked at Lavellan. "Thank you for... everything."

"Likewise," said Lavellan.

They stayed in the quiet, the blanket soft over his shoulders and Solas warm beside him.

“What were you like before the Anchor?” Solas asked.

Lavellan stared at Solas, tilted his head.

“Has it affected you?” Solas expanded. “Changed you in any way? Your mind, your morals, your spirit?”

Lavellan resisted laughing at the wording of his question. Changed? He was Change incarnate.

“Sure, it’s definitely changed my stress levels,” he joked and Solas chuckled.

“Such is the burden of leadership and elevation to holy prophet.”

“Who would’ve thought that would drive a man mad, huh?” He stared at his left hand. “Although I suppose I did change, but it’s not a direct influence of the Anchor. Just the situation it’s brought about. But really, haven’t we all been changed? Mark or no mark.”

“True enough,” Solas acceded.

“What brought this on?”

“It— You show a wisdom I have not seen since... since my deepest journeys into the ancient memories of the Fade.” His gaze softened. “You are not what I expected.”

Lavellan laughed, but it was tired and subdued. He passed a hand over his face. “I don’t feel very wise,” he said into his palm before he let his hand fall. “I feel like I’m fumbling.”

“You can be both. No being is perfect. Even the wise still finds things to learn.”

Two friends tottered out of the tavern, clearly intoxicated.

“You should rest soon,” said Solas.

“I can’t sleep.” He fiddled with the amulet. “It’s quiet. I usually like the quiet. Now my quarters feel too big. I mean, they *are* ridiculously big for one person but—” He shook his head.

“You miss home,” murmured Solas.

“Skyhold is home too, don’t get me wrong.”

“You are allowed more than one home. It is perfectly fine for you to miss one.”

If only Lavellan could have both at once.

An idea sparked and Lavellan brightened. “Remember in the baths when you said you could paint a scene from the Emerald Graves?”

“Yes?”

“Can I commission you to paint a mural for my quarters? Maybe... Maybe if it’s there... Not even the Emerald Graves but just something that feels like home.”

“I would be honoured to,” said Solas, smiling.

“How much should I pay you?”

“What nonsense. It is a favour for you. I do not require payment.”

Lavellan huffed. “Art consumes effort and time—”

“It is no effort if it’s for you.”

Lavellan tripped over his words for a second, ears warming. “I’m paying you. I insist.”

“The Inquisition already pays me a generous sum for research. I am under no great financial stress.”

“Solas,” he complained. “You’re already painting the rotunda frescoes for free. Please, let me pay you.”

Solas regarded him with another frown, then he sighed. “Very well,” he said and Lavellan beamed. “But not with money.”

Lavellan blinked. “What? With what then?”

“Will you teach me Dalish history in return?”

“I—” His mind blanked at the request. “What? Dalish history? What do you mean?”

“Your customs, culture, traditions, stories. What makes the Dalish, Dalish.”

“But don’t you already know a few things from the Fade?”

Solas looked away. “There is a great difference between objectively seeing it yourself and hearing the accounts from an actual Dalish elf. I have been quick to dismiss, impatient to learn, and too hurt to keep trying. Perhaps some things I will never agree with, but I would like to learn how the Dalish have become separate people on their own merit, and yet see what connects them to the elves of the past.”

“Solas, that’s...” Lavellan’s eyes widened, breath catching, heart leaping. Had he ever shown an interest in Dalish culture before? “I— Yes, I can— Yes.” Lavellan’s eyes squinted from his smile. “Thank you.”

He smiled back. “Do not thank me yet. You may end up disliking the mural.”

“You could draw a scribbly dragon and I think I’d be happy.”

“It would certainly give you something to amuse yourself with.”

Lavellan laughed, gentle and breathless with joy.

Solas worked on planning the mural immediately and Lavellan dropped in when he could to check on the designs and brainstorm the composition with Solas. During afternoons or evenings, Lavellan would talk about Dalish history. They’d started with Solas’ misconceptions and worked forward from there. Often, they’d be in the rotunda. Sometimes the garden. Sometimes they’d roam Skyhold as they spoke.

It was one such afternoon. Lavellan was halfway down the front courtyard's steps, in the middle of telling Solas about the politics in an Arlathvhen, when Lavellan caught sight of someone by the gates.

He stopped.

Solas glanced at him. "Lethallin?"

The person at the gates caught sight of him in return.

Lavellan took a hesitant step forward, feeling entirely unstable, then another step, and another, until he was rushing down the stairs.

Ellana dropped the bags she'd been carrying and ran to him.

Lavellan opened his arms and she all but jumped into them. He hugged her tight, burying his face into her neck.

"You're alive," he whispered and pulled back to cradle her face, torn between a sob or a disbelieving laugh. He managed a sound in between.

She laughed in return, but it sounded wet, her eyes shimmering. They hugged again and held onto one another and for a moment, everything was alright. He was alright. It would be alright.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

"I've missed you too. You don't know much—" His voice wavered. "I miss home, Lana."

She tightened the hug. "Home misses you too."

They pulled away from each other. Lavellan looked over his shoulder, found Solas hovering at the bottom of the courtyard's stairs with a gentle smile, and beckoned him closer. Solas hesitated, then approached.

"Solas," said Lavellan once Solas was close enough, "this is my sister, Ellana, the First of Clan Lavellan." A curl of pride still swirled within him every time he'd introduce her as the First. *Look at what she's accomplished!*

"Andaran atish'an," Solas greeted and Ellana nodded with a smile.

"Ellana, this is Solas. He's one of my dearest friends." The mocking voices of his friends echoed in his head. *Dearest friend! What a hoot!* That one sounded like Dorian.

"Thank you for taking care of my brother," said Ellana. "I know he can be stupid."

Lavellan scowled. The other inhabitants of Skyhold were stealing glances at them in curiosity.

Solas cleared his throat to disguise a laugh. "It is no trouble," he said.

"You don't have to be polite," said Ellana. "You can give it as a percentage. What percent of the time is my brother a pain?"

Lavellan shot Solas an unamused look. "Don't answer that."

"Ninety-eight," said Solas.

“You didn’t even hesitate!” said Lavellan and he pointed at the gate. “Get out. Both of you. I’m kicking you both out.”

“Does that include the hart?” Ellana asked.

“The—” He finally noticed the hart lingering by the gates and the wagon it was pulling. “Is that yours?” he asked Ellana.

“Yeah! Some of the Wycome folks gave it to us as thanks. Keeper Deshanna gave it to me when I said I wanted to come up and see you now that everything in Wycome has been sorted.”

“What?” he asked. “Why didn’t I get a letter back? Do you know how worried sick I was?”

“I *am* the letter back. Keeper Deshanna is now part of the new Wycome City Council as the Dalish representative, along with a city elf representative and several human merchants.”

Lavellan’s throat constricted and warmth stung his eyes because *alive, they were alive, I didn’t mess up.*

He ran his hands through his hair and laughed, shot them both a manic look because couldn’t they understand how significant this was? His family was alive. He didn’t kill them. His family was—

Lavellan reached for Ellana again as if confirming this wasn’t a dream. “Come here, let me have a look at you. I haven’t seen you in a while. You weren’t injured, were you? I know Wycome was a bitch and a half.”

She weathered through his fussing. “I’m fine, Hanon. I’m smart enough to stay alive.”

Lavellan gave her a look. “It wasn’t your intelligence I was questioning.” Rather, the impulse control of a bunch of racists with easy access to weapons.

Her eyes flashed in understanding and her disgruntled look softened as she patted his cheek. “I’m alright. The clan is safe.”

“I will leave you two so you may catch up,” said Solas. “I suspect there is a substantial amount of it to do.”

“I’m sorry to cut our conversation short,” said Lavellan.

“Please, do not apologise. We will have plenty of opportunities later.” He bowed. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ellana.”

“Likewise,” she said.

Solas left and they watched him go in silence.

Ellana glanced at Lavellan. “He is named Pride. Chosen or given?”

“Chosen,” murmured Lavellan. “A warning and a reminder.”

“To himself or to others?”

To that, Lavellan had no answer. Ellana shook her head and grinned at him instead.

“You and I have a *lot* of catching up to do! Your hunters have gotten into so much shit during Wycome, it’s not even funny.”

Oh, he was sure. “Technically they’re Aenoreir’s hunters now since he’s the Warleader.”

“You may be leading an army now, Hanon, but they’ll always be your hunters. Should’ve seen them when you left for the Conclave. Aenoreir couldn’t find his own head lost up his arse without you pulling it out. Iranæ would look for you every time she made a stupid joke and Sathian always sits by the halla every morning but you’re not there and it looks weird when he’s alone and...” She turned her head away, expression twisting, so subtle most people would have missed it.

Lavellan’s expression fell, heart twisting with longing, faded memories flashing in his mind. Her eyes turned misty.

“And we just— really miss you, Hanon. The aravel is so quiet without you and nobody fusses over my hair or nags me to clean up the mess. Your halla refuses to let the others ride her and she doesn’t pull any aravel besides ours. Everyone thought you’d died at the Conclave and the Keeper kept blaming herself, but then we heard about you getting caught up in the humans’ war and I know you told me about it but I was so scared and—”

“Hey,” he soothed, gathered her in his arms again as she gripped his scarf and rested her head against his chest. “It’s okay. It’s alright.”

Her shoulders shook. “And— And you looked so scared before you left.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “That was my own moment of weakness. I shouldn’t have burdened or scared you like that.”

She hit his chest with her fist, but the blow was weak. “Idiot, can you let me worry about you for once?”

“I think you’ve had half the year and more to do that.” He rested his chin on her head. “Lana, why did you come here? It isn’t safe.”

Ellana pulled back and frowned at him, eyes wet with unshed tears. “I came here to help my idiot family. No, you’re not turning me away or sending me back. I refuse to make that return trip.”

“Lana—” He paused, then cut himself off with a sigh. They were gathering an audience, and he couldn’t risk a spy overhearing them.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get some food in you. You’ve had a long trip and you need to rest, then we can discuss this later.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I *am* pretty hungry. Hearthmistress Lailani packed some of your favourite bread buns but I’ve been snacking on them.”

“Please tell me you left some.”

“Two.”

“How many did you have to start with?”

“...Ten.”

He slung his arm around her shoulder. “Man, fuck you.”

Lavellan introduced her to the inner circle. It went well enough. Nothing exploded.

But maybe he'd worried about the wrong thing.

Josephine leaned forward on her desk after the introductions, eyes glimmering. "Do you have any embarrassing stories about the Inquisitor?"

Lavellan squawked, Ellana grinned.

"Oh I have so many," she said.

"Excellent!"

Lavellan grabbed the back of her robe and dragged her away. "Look at the time, we have to go."

Ellana cupped her hand around her mouth. "I'll tell you all of it later," she mock-whispered.

He shut the door to Josephine's office and dragged a laughing Ellana back to his quarters so they could speak in privacy.

"I like Josephine," said Ellana.

"You only spoke to each other for about thirty seconds."

"So? Clearly she has her priorities straight."

They entered the door leading to the Keep and he pointed at the flights of stairs. "Less talking, more climbing."

Ellana's smile dropped. "Are they trying to kill you?"

"Probably." He shrugged and clapped her back. "Or they're trying to keep me fit! It's exercise, hop to it!"

She complained the whole way up. Once they reached the top, she was huffed and trying valiantly to hide it. Lavellan just opened his quarter's door, still smiling, and gestured her in. She entered, then paused at the sight before her, face falling. Lavellan bit back a smile.

"Why are there more stairs?" she shrieked.

"Just a tiny bit."

"Who puts stairs in their bedroom? Shems!"

"Actually, this fortress is ancient elven. Fen'Harel's, as a matter of fact."

Ellana let out an irritated noise and stomped up the stairs. "I'm going to push the Dread Wolf down a flight of stairs. See how he likes it."

"I think I did actually threaten to push him down the stairs once," he mused and followed her up the stairs in a calmer manner.

"You should have gone through with it," she muttered, but her complaints were cut off once she reached the top of the stairs. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Sweet Sylaise, this is where

you *sleep*?”

“Massive, isn’t it?” Lavellan eyed the large wall by the upper ledge. Solas had already spread the rough underlayer of plaster yesterday, his supplies and scaffolding tucked away to the side of the upper walkway. Lavellan had initially just wanted the wall along his bed painted because that upper wall was too much work but Solas had insisted and refused any extra payment Lavellan had offered.

“The time you dedicate towards teaching me is more than enough.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“I treasure your company more than gold.”

He pursed his lips, biting back a smile.

“It seems a bit... lonely.” She wandered the room and frowned at the Dalish blanket on his bed, ran her fingers over it. “I don’t think I know this pattern.”

“Clan Venalin,” he said. “They’ve settled in the Dales for now.”

She fluttered over his bookshelves in the corner and pulled out a grimoire. It was one of the rare books he’d procured on ancient elven magic, gifted to him by Morrigan since she had two copies. Somehow. He didn’t ask how she’d come across two. Ellana’s eyes turned starry as she flipped through the pages.

“Yes, you can borrow it,” he said, already anticipating her next question. “Say ‘thank you, Mahanon.’”

“Fuck off,” she laughed and tucked it back into the shelf, patting it. “I’ll look at it later.”

Ellana paused, mirth fading.

Her expression turned sombre as she faced him. “Hanon, we need to talk. About... everything. Your situation, it’s—” She shook her head. “Please clear a few things up. You were so panicked that night that I wasn’t sure what to make of anything.”

Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. Yeah, he’d been a mess that night.

“I was supposed to be dead,” he muttered.

Ellana sat on the edge of his bed and patted the spot beside her. “From the beginning,” she said.

He hesitated, but he sat. The beginning? Which beginning?

“You might not like what you hear,” he warned. “The truth about the elves... It isn’t pretty.”

“It’s the truth. I want to hear it.”

Lavellan fiddled with the end of his scarf, tried to sort out the mess of his thoughts.

He sighed.

And he talked.

Chapter End Notes

Ellana has arrived!

Those fallen locks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

and strands of truth—

Telling Ellana the truth was both distressing and liberating. The thoughts tangled in his head, and the words stuck in his throat, but she waited for him without urgency. He expected her to look at him as if he'd grown two heads, but again, she listened without judgement. The only times she interrupted were for clarifications.

Lavellan didn't reveal Fen'Harel's true identity.

By the end of his explanations, it was late into the night and they had huddled under the Dalish blanket, lit only by the dim candlelight, dead silence on her end while he wrung his fingers. He shot her an uncertain glance.

"Shit," she whispered.

He laughed, but it was weak. "I know."

"And you have no idea how... How you went from being Elvhen to Dalish— Holy shit, Hanon, you were Elvhen. I—" She stared wide-eyed at the blanket. "I don't—" Ellana rubbed her face and cursed softly once more.

In retrospect, maybe he shouldn't have revealed so much in such a short amount of time.

"I'm going to need a few days to let this all sink in," she said.

"Make it weeks. Even months. I'm still dealing with it myself." He clutched the blanket close. "I'm sorry."

"Stop apologising, Hanon. You didn't ask for any of this."

It was terrible of him to offload all of this onto her, but some part of him breathed easier at having some of the weight lifted, at being able to tell somebody who he was.

"You believe me?" he asked. "It does sound far-fetched."

"Of course I believe you. I know you wouldn't lie about something like this."

She scooted closer to him and they stayed in the quiet for a while.

"Can I see it?" she asked, breaking the silence. "The Anchor?"

He placed his hand palm-up in her hands and lit it, the green light awash and rippling over their faces. It was like holding a small, dying star. Ellana traced careful fingers over the lines of his palm.

"This is killing you," she said, bitter and sullen.

"Eventually."

“Hanon, your lack of worry about that is scaring me. If you didn’t have the Inquisition, if you didn’t have this insane mission and goal, would you just... let it kill you?”

He fell silent. Ellana gently squeezed her hand around his wrist.

“A lot of people have been telling me to live with them instead of dying for them,” he murmured.

“You just direct me to these people so I can give them a fruit basket or something.”

Lavellan snorted softly to himself.

“But you’re still not really living for yourself.”

He shrugged. “No, but for now, just... Live for others, right? Then, maybe, one day... One day I can do that for myself.”

Ellana rested her head against his shoulder. “Okay,” she whispered.

For a while, they stared at the Anchor’s flickering light, just listening to each other breathe, but Ellana broke the silence again. She never did like the silence. It had annoyed him to no end when they were living together.

“Can we please have peace and quiet?” he griped.

“No, shut up, I’m talking.”

Lavellan groaned.

He smiled faintly at the memory.

“I feel it,” she said. “The Veil is strange around the Anchor. Weaker, but more malleable.”

“Well, it *is* stemming from Fen’Harel’s power, and he’s the one who made the Veil.”

She frowned at him. “Who is he? You never did tell me. Have you introduced us already?”

He kept quiet. She huffed out a soft, disbelieving breath.

“I can’t believe this. You’re protecting him? After all he’s done?”

“I’m not protecting him,” he said. “I’m protecting *you*.”

“How? By keeping me in the dark? By making sure I don’t know who to trust in your gods-forsaken fortress? Where I’ll constantly watch my words and actions because I don’t want to endanger *you* by accidentally revealing that you know who he is?” She rubbed her face. “Hanon, you’re not doing me any favours by not telling me.”

He grimaced, closed his hand and dimmed the light further, the glow barely slipping past the cracks in his fingers. Still, he said nothing.

“Don’t lie, Hanon,” she pleaded. “Not to me. You still care for him. You’re protecting him.”

“Protecting is a little extreme,” he said. “It’s just... not my truth to share. I’m not stopping you from finding out, but you won’t be hearing it from me. Just be careful about it. What I *can* do is give you the names and faces of his agents. They’re the ones you really need to look out for. I’ve been compiling a list of his agents since Haven.” He could do it under the guise of giving her a

tour of Skyhold.

She stared at him. “You’ve always been a good liar, but you’re even more brilliant at it when it comes to yourself.”

Lavellan opened his mouth in protest. “That’s not—”

“Go on.” She smiled. “I love being proven right.”

“You’re annoying. Go home.”

“I am. I’m with my family so I’m home now.”

Lavellan shut his mouth and looked away with a soft huff.

She laughed. “Softie.”

The Anchor’s light faded and they were doused back in candlelight. He wrapped the blankets tighter around them both and Ellana wiggled her cold toes against his feet.

“He wasn’t just a friend, was he?” she asked.

He smiled grimly. “The Dread Wolf took me.”

“Has he taken you again?”

To that, he gave no answer.

Even though they’d prepared a room for her, she still somehow found a way to scatter her belongings around his room like the heathen she was. She’d always barge in to do some research while he was doing paperwork.

Still, he couldn’t help but smile at the books littering the space and Solas’ painting supplies arrayed along the upper ledge. He could forgive the mess this time. It made the space feel less empty. Less lonely. Some afternoons, Solas would join them and work on the mural (he’d cloaked it with magic because he wanted to surprise Lavellan, apparently).

It was another such afternoon, but he’d taken a momentary break from his paperwork so he could sit on the floor with Ellana and comb her hair.

“Have you even touched the comb since I left?” he asked.

“I was *busy*! You think I had time to comb my hair when— *Ow!*”

“Hold still!” The comb caught. He couldn’t yank it out. “Fuck’s sake, Lana. Just cut your hair if you’re going to let it get tangled like this.”

“No, I like it long.”

“Then comb—” *yank*— “it!” He freed the comb and she squawked, clutching at the sore spot of her head.

Solas shot them a quick, amused glance. Lavellan ran the comb through her hair once more and sighed in relief when it didn't catch.

She turned and gave him a pleading pout. "Now braid my hair the way mae did it."

"Do it yourself."

"You know I suck at it and then you'll just get annoyed and redo it yourself." She shrugged. "Save yourself the effort."

Lavellan's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Turn," he said morosely and she beamed.

Ellana returned to her reading while Lavellan started the braid that he hadn't done in three years. Not after he'd cut his hair.

He missed that routine of braiding his hair. It had been a morning and evening ritual, bookending the days. In the mornings, it was a quiet moment to himself, the first accomplishment of the day. At night, he'd undo it before bed, a way to tell himself that it was time to unwind.

Lavellan glanced at Solas. He'd sometimes watched Lavellan braid his hair in silence or had done it for him once Lavellan had shown him how to.

It took Lavellan a while to recall the process, hesitating every now and again. Ellana noticed.

"You never did tell me why you cut your hair," she murmured.

His hands stilled.

The stump of his left arm throbbed with phantom pains. He gritted his teeth as he tried to do the braid himself, held locks of his hair between his lips to keep them in place, but it wasn't the same. The braid would end up too loose, or the tiers would be uneven. His right arm was getting sore.

Frustration pricked at his eyes, built behind his teeth.

"Just— Fucking—" He tugged at it.

If Solas were here—

"He isn't," he snapped at himself. Solas wasn't here, he was gone, and Lavellan's fucking hair wasn't cooperating, and his arm didn't feel right, and nothing felt right. Nothing. Everything had gone to shit; he couldn't fix his own stupid hair. Everything was wrong.

The ache in his arm burned. Both arms. Different kinds of burns.

The ghosts of caring fingers threaded through his hair along with the memories of gentle touches and a silvery voice murmuring in his ears.

Lavellan screamed.

He pulled his hair and kicked the chair he'd been sitting on, screamed as he threw the brush at the mirror and cracked it. Screamed as he knocked aside everything atop the vanity. Screamed as he reached into the drawers and grabbed the scissors and attacked his hair with it, locks of his hair scattering around him.

His hair fell uneven around his face.

Lavellan panted, his ugly, broken reflection snarling at him.

He screamed again.

Then sobbed.

He fell to his knees, stabbing the scissors into the carpet, vision blurry.

Sera came into the room. She silently eased the scissors away from his hand and fixed his hair for him. Vivienne arrived somewhat later. She cleaned the mess he'd made and helped with his hair, softly murmuring to Sera which parts looked uneven so she could cut it. That was the first time he'd seen them work together without going at each other's throats.

The sounds of snipping filled the silence.

Later, he saw the cropped cut of his hair and felt even emptier.

The tears he'd shed then had been quiet and cold.

"I had a crisis," he said and resumed braiding. Solas stopped painting and sent him a curious glance. Ellana didn't ask further.

It was silly, perhaps, to have cried over losing his hair, but it had felt like saying goodbye. Goodbye to who he'd been. Goodbye to the happier times, the happier him. His days had felt empty. It had also felt like a betrayal to his mother since he'd kept his hair long in memory of her.

Sometimes over the following years, the ghost of a lover and his careful fingers undoing the braid would return and throw Lavellan into another fit of rage and loss.

He'd tried to grow his hair after, but a close encounter with an assassin had snipped it short again. It was longer now, but still not long enough for a braid.

He finished arranging Ellana's hair. A two-tiered plait wrapped around each side of the head and joined into a long, central braid. He reached for his own hair and took the hair tie out to secure it.

"It's kind of weird," said Ellana.

"What is?" he asked.

"The fact that your room is— *was*," she said with an irritating smidge of smugness, "so neat. You've been in this room for a while, but it doesn't feel that personalised. Well, except for the Dalish blankets, but those were new additions."

"You know how I feel about a messy space. Our aravel was a nightmare because of you."

He finished tying her hair. She felt it, then turned to grin at him.

"It wasn't that bad. You were just anal about those things." She swept her arm at the room. "Look at this! Clutter makes things feel lived-in!"

"My *clutter* is neat, is all. I don't leave things on the floor and bed like you do."

"How did you two ever manage to cohabit the same aravel?" asked Solas.

She groaned. "Get this, he *labelled* the clutter." She mimicked his voice. "*Lana, I said the corner clutter is for hunting gear, your staff goes in the study pile with the rest of your books.*"

“I don’t talk like that.”

“*Lana, why is your clutter in my corner of the aravel?*”

Solas snorted to himself.

Lavellan threw his arms up. “We had a system and you kept breaking it.”

“Anal bastard.”

“Eat shit.”

Lavellan tugged on her braid and she squawked. She hit his toes. He hissed and hopped back to his desk so he could get back to his paperwork.

They worked in a blissful quiet for a while until Ellana cursed at her book.

“Having fun?” he asked, not looking up from writing.

“I’m reading about how to mask your presence in the Fade while dreaming, but all of the methods I’ve read about would hide me from *all* the denizens of the Fade. Can’t I... fine tune it?”

Lavellan stopped. “Why...?” Though he already had an idea.

Her silence proved his suspicions.

“Lana—”

She groaned. “Piss, you’ve already got *that* tone. Look, hear me out. A spirit of Knowledge, right? If I can just mask my presence from demons, but not spirits...”

“The books you have accumulated are Circle-regulated,” said Solas from upstairs. “Naturally, they will not disclose the method of dreaming you seek.”

Ellana perked. “So the method I’m looking for *does* exist?”

“Of course,” he said. “Most things are possible.”

“Solas, don’t encourage her.”

Solas chuckled and placed his brush down, faced them and leaned his elbows on the railing. Crushed pigments once again stained his hands.

“But your brother’s apprehension is founded,” he said. “Some demons are clever, able to masquerade as a seemingly harmless spirit. Such methods are employed by a number of demons, namely, Envy, Guile, and Pride.” Lavellan’s gaze flicked towards him. *Able to masquerade as a seemingly harmless spirit indeed.* He’d been Wisdom, and Wisdom could become Pride. Which was he now?

Not a slide, but a space, Cole had said. What did that mean? That he was capable of either? Both yet neither?

“Why do you seek Knowledge?” asked Solas.

“Why does anyone seek knowledge?” Ellana fired back.

“Do evasive answers run in the family?”

“I learned from Hanon.”

Lavellan snorted. “Don’t go airing my secrets out.”

She fiddled with her braid. “Hanon, do you own unregulated books about this?”

“You’ve unearthed the library,” said Lavellan. “And my shelves.”

She faked gagging. “You have books on *politics*.”

Ah yes, those had been placed there by Josephine and Leliana, some by Vivienne. The rest were about Dalish lore and Elvhenan. Some were works of fiction. There was a poetry collection in there somewhere, given to him by Dorian. A book about trees from Sera and Varric as a joke. *Inquisitree*. Assholes.

“They’re riveting,” he teased. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Would you like to hear about Fereldan arlings?”

“I’d rather eat what Solas is painting with.”

“Please refrain,” said Solas. “Although, despite the prohibition on consuming my crafting supplies, you are free to borrow a few of my books. Most of them are titles outside of Circle regulation, if not all. I caught Enchanter Vivienne sneering at one of them, which is a good sign that I have a worthwhile book in my possession.”

Lavellan sighed.

“Oh, don’t mind if I take a look, thank you,” said Ellana.

“On one condition,” said Lavellan. “You do it under Solas’ supervision. If he says yes, that is.”

Ellana glanced at Solas and hesitated.

Solas tilted his head. “I can spare some time, although most of our lessons will have to be done in dreams.”

“The business of dreams is best conducted in dreams, got it,” she said.

Lavellan glanced between the two of them with an uneasy pull to his lips. Some part of him screamed that it wasn’t wise to let the Dread Wolf so close to his sister, but he wasn’t sure what he was more worried about: that Ellana would figure Solas out, or that Solas would figure Ellana out, and by extension, Lavellan.

But he’d take that risk if it meant keeping her safe.

Maybe he was babying her too much. Lavellan chewed on his lip. He just didn’t want to lose her again. Not after he’d managed to save her and the clan.

“It is somewhat difficult,” said Solas as he returned to his painting, “but you seem to be an accomplished mage, judging from the stories I’ve heard from the Inquisitor.”

“Really?” asked Ellana, shooting Lavellan a suspicious look. “What kind of stories?”

“From the top of my head, he says you’ve studied binding rituals for spirits, and that you know

how to disrupt it.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, tone staying even, but her expression shifted into astonished disbelief. Ellana emphatically pointed at Lavellan and mimed snapping his neck.

Sorry, Lavellan mouthed with a grimace.

She threw her arms up. *I don't know how to do that*, she mouthed back, panic seeping into her disbelief. Solas continued painting, unaware of their little crisis.

Someone knocked.

Ellana rubbed her face. “I got it,” she said and disappeared down the stairs. The door opened. “Oh, hello!” he heard her say.

“Good afternoon, is the Inquisitor inside? Sister Nightingale said he was in his quarters. I apologise for the intrusion.”

“Who is it?” Lavellan asked and stood.

“It’s Cillian, Inquisitor.”

Cillian? Lavellan had placed him in charge of figuring out the glyphs in the Exalted Plains. Lavellan swallowed the uneasy knot in his throat.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and gestured Cillian in.

“Come in,” he said. “Is this about the glyphs?”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Cillian hailed from Clan Ralaferin, one of the most respected clans, up there with Clan Lavellan in terms of collected lore. He’d remained loyal after the revelation of Fen’Harel, so Lavellan trusted him.

Lavellan cleared his table so Cillian could place the sketches of the glyphs above it. They crowded around the table.

“What have you found?” asked Lavellan.

“These glyphs predate the ruins you have found them in,” said Cillian, tapping one of the sketches. “Likely transferred onto the stone from an older edifice. It could date back to Elvhenan, or even earlier. The connections you’ve provided me with have allowed me to translate the glyphs.”

He unrolled an annotated map of Thedas over the glyphs, an area marked and circled near the Waking Sea.

“They were directions,” said Cillian.

“Where to?” asked Lavellan, the knot of unease threading through his chest.

Cillian looked up at him.

“The Lost Temple of Dirthamen.”

Chapter End Notes

LET'S GOOOOOOOOO. TEMPLE TIME. It's going to be so relaxing, so lovely, a wonderful vacation. Everything will be fine :)

He's here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

he's here.

Dirthamen's Temple was somewhere in the forests of Val Chevin. They made good time on the Imperial Highway, cut across the Heartlands, and crossed the river into the dense forest near Val Foret where they made camp.

Cassandra folded first for the night, followed by Solas, which left Lavellan with Cole and Ellana.

Vergala had become more subdued as they neared Val Chevin.

"Everything alright?" he asked her. She cawed. Even that was subdued. Or no, not subdued.

Afraid.

"Moving, missing, then missed," said Cole. "Made to stay. We're getting closer. So long as she stays, return is possible, but then the sky was held back. Blood clots."

Ellana fixed Cole with a quizzical look. Vergala settled onto Lavellan's lap and nudged her head against his stomach. He stroked her head with a frown.

"She doesn't want to hear about it anymore," murmured Cole. "Sorry."

She squawked.

"Okay. I'll stop."

Lavellan held her close and said nothing else. He examined his surroundings, the air filled with a revelation he could almost taste, yet still painfully out of reach.

"I think I'll go sleep," said Lavellan and stood, cradling Vergala. "Cole, are you alright to keep watch?"

"I don't need sleep. Yes."

Vergala flew and perched herself on a nearby tree. Lavellan entered the dim tent and settled into a bedroll, left the other one for Ellana.

His dreams were fitful. Not nightmares. Just... agitated.

It was a living darkness, and it was warm, steady, keeping him together. A welcome pressure settled over his chest, around him. Lavellan nestled into it. A voice whispered by his ear.

"Welcome back."

Lavellan opened his eyes, his head clear. No exhaustion. He was calm, alert, focused.

Welcome back.

He sat up. Ellana was still asleep.

Lavellan left the tent, found Cole sitting by the long-dead fire, using the coals to draw over the stones. Cole set the coal down and looked up at his arrival. Lavellan took in his surroundings again, the air crisp in his lungs, brushing over his skin like a solid, guiding thing. It was a quiet dawn, but the sky was bleeding with violent colours.

“I heard him,” said Lavellan.

He just wasn’t sure if the dream was building off repressed memories or if there was something about the area that had triggered it. It had been the same in Ghilan’nain’s Grove, but his dream there had been clearer.

“The echoes tangle with your echoes, knot it into a real thing,” said Cole.

“My head is clear,” Lavellan said because that felt monumental. He hadn’t realised his head had been foggy at all. Had it been foggy his entire life? “I feel awake.”

The pressure on his chest was gone, but the ghost of it lingered.

Cole went back to marking the stones with the coal. “When you remember, what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Body and blood breathing shadows of another name. You have yours and he has his. When you learn yours, you learn his, because you wrote each other into the spaces where your darkness meets.”

Lavellan ran a hand through his hair. Usually, Cole's comments were difficult to decipher, but the focus and clarity that had descended upon Lavellan now made his words easier to hear. They were never meant to be understood as words; they had to be understood as what they were underneath.

Cole stared at him. “You’re hearing me better.”

“Underneath,” said Lavellan. “But still not quite.” He sat on a log and stared down at his hands. The edges of him felt defined.

He watched the violent sunrise, its light scattering across the foliage of the forest trees like splatters of blood.

“Welcome back,” Lavellan said to himself.

Lavellan feared they would get lost once they entered the forests of Val Chevin, but the guiding feel of the wind pulled him along the correct path.

Something changed in the air as they neared the temple’s estimated position. It was thick and ancient and unwelcoming. Apparently. At least, that was how everybody talked about and acted around it.

But to him, it felt like coming home.

They alighted their horses upon encountering the scattered remnants of elven architecture. Cole walked beside him.

“It calls you home, but it’s not,” said Cole. “Be careful. It’s angry.”

They followed the trail of ruins. The path had been cleared.

“Someone’s been here,” Lavellan said.

“Possibly the Venatori,” said Cassandra.

“Or treasure hunters,” said Solas. “In which case, assume them dead.”

Lavellan frowned at him. “How come?”

Solas cast the sky an uneasy look. “Either they encountered the Venatori, or they were swallowed by Dirthamen’s temple. His court is not known for being welcoming.”

No, they weren't. The entire process of finding the temple in the first place had been so convoluted, whose idea was that?

“Scatter the glyphs,” I say.

Dirthamen looks up at me, intrigued. “Oh? Is it not complicated enough?”

“If they’re truly devoted to you, they’ll prove their cunning. You’ll know that whoever reached your temple is dedicated.”

Lavellan scowled. Oh.

“Asshole,” he muttered at himself.

Night had fallen by the time they’d reached the temple, and Lavellan sucked in a breath at its dilapidated state. Much of the roof and walls had collapsed, and ivy had overtaken most of the structures still standing.

This used to be grand.

A tremor of irritation plucked at him for the neglect, but he shook it off. It wasn’t as if it had been neglected on purpose. It wouldn’t have been. Dirthamen had possessed one of the most loyal courts.

To the point of death.

How did he know that?

His head pulsed and the surroundings flickered. Night turned to day and the dilapidated temple was restored to its former glory, mighty stones gleaming in the sunlight as the temple’s expansive network dominated and yet hid within the forest. Songs of worship from within echoed in his ears.

He let out a shuddering breath. Familiar sight. He’d walked this path a thousand times.

No, not walked.

He eyed the cerulean skies.

He'd flown.

Something stifling wrapped around his heart.

His head pulsed again, and the grand, gleaming temple became dilapidated once more. The songs of worship faded. Day faded to star-strung night.

A shadow passed through him like a ghost, took his breath as it did, solidifying in front of him as the raven-cloaked figure. It rose from the smoke and shadows, ghostly, a half-forgotten memory as they walked ahead. They tipped their head, a slight movement. An almost-glance back. *Follow me.*

Lavellan stopped walking, his apprehension threading with his anticipation.

Where would they lead him, this time?

"Inquisitor?" asked Cassandra at his sudden halt.

"Just admiring the scenery," he lied.

The raven-cloaked figure started walking.

"Let's go," said Lavellan.

Once they reached the temple's entrance, the cloaked figure disappeared.

A hole had been blasted through the large doors, forcefully breached. Lavellan glowered, a displeased noise escaping him. Solas placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and Lavellan rubbed his face and took a deep breath.

Vergala perched on Lavellan's shoulder and they entered. The first chamber they encountered was dim and slightly flooded, lit only by Ellana and Solas' magic.

"Found the treasure hunters," said Ellana, prodding the camping supplies in a corner with her staff. "At least, their gear."

Lavellan picked up a journal that had been left behind with the supplies, thankfully not waterlogged, and flipped through the pages. It was a chronicle of an Orlesian archivist's search for —

Dirthamen's Wisdom.

A small part of him reared its head back and cackled.

Good luck! it taunted.

"What does it say?" asked Ellana.

"The priesthood mutilated their High Priest," he said, passed it for her to read. "The author of this journal seems to have been going mad too."

She took it and frowned deeper as she read through it.

“What kind of followers would act against their High Priest?” asked Cassandra.

“Dirthamen’s,” muttered Solas. The comment and the distaste in it made an irrational surge of ire press at Lavellan, but he swallowed it down.

“They’re searching for an artefact called Dirthamen’s Wisdom. So are the Venatori, I presume,” said Lavellan. “Solas, heard of it before?” He cast back for any helpful memories but all he had were brief flashes of... something. Images? Silver? Ringing of metal. Smell of a battlefield. A voice, but not its words.

“I am not certain,” he said. “Dirthamen and his followers safeguarded their secrets well. What one claimed as truth, the other claimed false. Try as I might, it is difficult to glean their knowledge.”

“Trembling, trying to keep itself together,” said Cole. “Hurt, sorrow, fear, gathered in great gasping breaths. Crying, but... no answer.”

They proceeded, descended the short stairs into the water lapping around their ankles.

“Solas, are you wearing shoes?” asked Lavellan.

“I am not.”

“How’s the water?” he teased.

His face pulled. “Survivable.”

They passed the low archway into a shadowed hall.

An echo of a memory flitted past. He’d walked through these very same halls, floors golden and glittering, stones dark and foreboding. Claustrophobic. Embracing—

Devotees pause as I pass through the temple. Hatred simmers in their eyes and auras. Some showed respect. Some fear. I can kill them with a flick of my wrist and they know it, so they keep quiet.

“It’s him,” they whisper. “Isha’belsal’in^[1].”

“He has come to take our secrets.”

“Come to give us secrets.”

A collective of priests greets me.

“Lord Dirthamen sends a message,” I say.

“A secret?” one asks.

“Secrets,” I clarify. “Set your preparations. Some of you may die.”

Excitement ripples through everyone and they murmur to one another. Secrets so important, so grand, that it may cause one to die, a grand secret that a body can scarce handle... Some of them can only hope to dream of being bestowed such an honour.

And I am holding at least fifteen of those in my mind. It's getting hard to focus.

"Do hurry," I say. "I have more duties to attend to."

"We will prepare as long as we need," a priest huffs back, puffs his chest out. He must be new. The older priests shake their heads.

"Oh?" I take a step closer. "As long as you need? Well, it seems like you don't need much time at all, capable as you are." I raise my hand and clamp it around his head. His face ashens. "Be a dear and take this one off of me."

Shadows swirl around my hand and the secrets flow into his mind.

He screams.

Then crumples dead.

I retake the secrets and turn to the other priests.

"Continue," I say, smiling.

Lavellan staggered and Ellana caught him, saved him from tripping into the water. Vergala started and flew, transferred to Cole's shoulders.

"Hanon?" she asked.

The knowledge settled in his head and he recalled Kieran's words, unbidden yet retained.

"You hold smoke better than water."

Mythal had her Well of Sorrows, but Dirthamen's nexus of knowledge could not be a place, could not be an archive of passed knowledge gathered in one place. No, Dirthamen had safeguarded the secrets of the empire. Some ruinous, some mundane. To leave them all in one place was to court danger.

His Well of Sorrows had been his priesthood, as well as a few members of the El'amelan. Those who could weather it.

Ellana frowned at his extended silence.

"Are you alright?" Solas asked softly behind him. Lavellan straightened and eased their concerns with a smile.

"Yeah, I think I tripped over a loose tile," he lied, meaning to continue the excuse, but stopped when his gaze fell on the statue at the end of the hallway where the path branched into two. His brows raised. Was that...?

Lavellan approached and it *was*. A statue of Fen'Harel. A glyph glimmered at its base.

"Veilfire please," he said as he frowned at the statue, ran his hands over its flank. What was it doing here? They'd found one in Mythal's temple, which was fair enough, but inside Dirthamen's temple?

It was Solas who passed him the torch and their gaze met briefly, green dancing in Solas' eyes,

both their expressions carefully neutral. Lavellan turned and hovered the fire over the glyph.

It imparted the priesthood's final words and oath. Whispers surrounded him, flooded him, plucking at a memory and reeling it to the forefront of his mind—

"You disapprove," says Dirthamen. "Of what Father did."

"The Wolf threw his tantrum and reaped the consequences," I say.

"A response yet not an answer."

"It is simply not my place to cast judgement upon your father."

"Well it is mine." He looks out his large window overlooking the spires and floating isles of Arlathan. "The harsher the disciplining of the child, the higher the likelihood of the child acting out."

"Acting out," I repeat in slight disbelief. Removing the vallaslin is more than acting out.

"If Father had been calmer..." He sighs. "I am glad I inherited my mother's temperament."

"Do you know what you have also inherited from your mother?" I ask. "Your cunning."

He eyes me. "Something you would like to say, my raven?"

"That would depend on the probability of me being able to keep my tongue after."

Dirthamen looks out the window, quiet. Then, he looks back at me and smiles. "Go on."

"Your mother wanted the Wolf to break."

He digests this. No sign of anger, but he's always been subdued with his expressions.

"I would be careful," Dirthamen says slowly, "about these thoughts."

"I am. I merely took a calculated risk this time. Do I get to keep my tongue?"

He tilts his head. "Your words do not leave this room."

I bow my head. "Vin, ma Venuralas."

Lavellan returned to himself, blinking at the glyph, then at the wolf statue. He frowned. Intriguing. He *should* have lost his tongue after insinuating something like that. Just how much had Dirthamen let him get away with?

The Well flooded gently in his head, coaxed him. Towards what?

"The secrets of this temple have remained unspoken for too long," said Solas. "They wish to be

known.”

“Secrets stale in the silence,” said Cole. “I don’t like it here.”

“Oh good, I thought it was just me,” sighed Ellana.

The sounds of splashing water echoed in the space. Cassandra unsheathed her sword.

“Undead!” she cried.

He grumbled, drawing his daggers. Could he please just exist for five minutes without something trying to kill him?

Ellana raised her hand. “I’d just like to express my extreme distaste and disapproval of putting the body parts of a dead priest back together.”

“Noted,” said Lavellan as he took the urn housing one of the High Priest’s desiccated organs and gave it to Ellana.

“And ignored?” She shoved it in her pack.

“Obviously. I have a feeling that assembling the Highest One will give answers as to what Dirthamen’s Wisdom is. Those are ears, by the way.”

She pulled a face. “First a tongue, now ears. Great. It’s like the world’s worst game of Make-a-Friend. If one of the organs turns out to be his dick, I’m out of here.”

“We should not linger,” said Cassandra. “Let us... *assemble* the high priest back together, retrieve what we need, and leave.”

“I stepped on a mushroom,” said Solas flatly.

“Are you sure it’s a mushroom?” asked Ellana.

“I would like to believe it’s a mushroom.”

“You should really start packing shoes,” said Lavellan.

“Considering your tendency to explore unsavoury locations, yes, I suppose I should start.”

Lavellan picked up the Veilfire torch that had fallen during their fight with a few undead and made a face as water trickled out of it. His pants were soaked.

A bell chimed in his head. Lavellan turned, waving the Veilfire in the dark as he looked for the source of the sound.

There!

Lavellan hurried towards the noise, Ellana’s exclamation faint in his ears and the resulting splash of water behind him as his companions followed even fainter.

The glyph glimmered on a section of the wall. Lavellan hovered the Veilfire above it and a

sensation clamped around his head, firm—

“You say you wish to serve Lord Dirthamen?” she asks, her face youthful but severe, shadows hissing around her ankles.

My breath catches. I nod.

“You are not fit to serve him.”

“I know,” I say.

She blinks, a momentary flicker of surprise in her aura, but her face smooths into that severe expression again. Something tells me I’ll be seeing it often.

“You’re here to make me fit,” I continue. “I know. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“No, merely five days ago.” She scoffs. “You are wasting your time and his. It was a mistake for you to have crossed because you do not have the capacity to serve, and you never will.”

I stare at her, steady, her words giving rise to a solid emotion I can’t name, pulling at my teeth. “That’s your job, isn’t it? If you can’t make me fit, then you’re the one wasting your time. And mine.”

“Do you think you’re so clever, mouthing off like this?”

“I think I have a point. And I think I’m bored of this. Train me, or not. If not, I’ll find other ways.”

She stares. I stare back.

She tilts her head. It’s barely a movement, my only indication being the sway of the strand of plaited hair behind her ear.

“I am Thalamya,” she says. “I will be training you along with prospective elves wishing to serve Lord Dirthamen as his agent in the future. We will be heading to an island north of Arlathan, and there we will remain for a century.”

My eyes widen. “What? I thought— I thought I’d still see him.”

“Do you think Lord Dirthamen has the time to babysit? You are unworthy to see him as you are now. It was gracious of him to have even visited you after your crossing.”

I bristle. “I shapeshifted for him then. He was pleased.”

“If you wish to serve, you cannot just shapeshift.”

I want to bite her. “I know—”

“You do not,” she cuts off. “We must train you to stop speaking out of turn.”

“A century—”

“If you are exceptional, perhaps you will be allowed to see him again and join the

ranks of his agents. But for now, stop your mouthing off. You can barely control your own emotions and temper. How do you expect to serve him?"

I shut my mouth but my face feels flushed. Red. This feeling is rolling and writhing and red.

Very well. I'll make myself so exceptional that I shorten the time it takes to return to his side.

More whispers from this temple's priesthood fluttered in his ears, but they were secondary to the memory and the emotions the glyph had unearthed. He licked his teeth and tasted the echoes of frustration and ire and impatience.

Yes, Thalamya. Faint memories of stern, dark eyes, strict voice, the disapproving and disappointed pull to her mouth.

His lips twitched. What was it with him ending up with cranky mentors? The old Warleader, Hanathir, had been the same. Always barking at him, the old sod. May the bastard rest in peace.

"Well, that's unnerving," said Ellana behind him, squinting at the glyph, had only heard the whispers.

Solas turned his head and walked away. Lavellan watched him go.

"Dirthamen had betrayed us."

But Dirthamen had loved Solas, had thought of him as family. He'd even paid homage to Solas here. What happened? Lavellan looked back at the glyph.

"I need to find the rest," Lavellan whispered.

Ellana looked back at him with a curious frown, but she faltered at whatever expression he was wearing.

"He's loud here," said Cole.

Chapter End Notes

Settle in folks. This place is going to be memory-heavy.

Translation

[1] **Isha'belsal'in:** The Man of Many Faces^{[\[1\]](#)}

Hunger

can you feel it gnawing?

They entered the temple's main sanctuary and clambered over the roots of the large trees that had made their home here, their canopies stretching over patches of where the roof used to be. Moonlight flooded into the area, glimmering like chains of diamonds over the water sloshing around their ankles.

Vergala took flight and circled the skies instead. Eager to get away from this place.

They fought their way through more undead, then entered the temple's northern wing. A ringing sounded in his head. Lavellan shot Ellana a subtle, meaningful look. She looked around, and her gaze fell on a mural by the wall.

"Hey Solas, what's this?" she asked and approached the mural, successfully distracting him. Cassandra followed them in curiosity. Lavellan made a mental note to get Ellana a tray of honeyed bread when they return to Skyhold.

He followed the ringing and approached the glyph by the wall. Cole stood beside him.

"Thick in your lungs," said Cole. "Be careful."

"Great," he grumbled.

He lit the glyph and almost gasped at the press of it—

My magic flares, spills, and I try to call it back to myself, my brows scrunching in concentration. It's difficult, but I manage it. It coils itself back up, like a spool of thread resting within my being, but it stays fitful.

The more I grow in power, the less I am in control. An irritating paradox.

The sound of footsteps approach behind me, so soft that it would have eluded most people's hearing. I open my eyes and raise my head. The grass around me is singed. I bite my inner cheek in frustration.

"I know," I say, my voice and expression not betraying any emotion. As I've learned. "It's still hard. It's getting harder."

Thalamya stands beside me, looking out at the sea stretching in the distance. The hillside I'd retreated to is littered with patches of burnt grass from my meditations. My attempts, anyway. Attempts to pull the force of my magic back, stop it from being so... explosive.

"It is your nature," she says.

"I know."

"You embody one of the main forces of the Fade and the Beyond."

"I know."

"You know I dislike it when you say that."

"Then stop telling me things I already know."

Thalamya's severe expression eases slightly. From her, that's pretty much a smile.

"It has been seven decades," she says. "I never could train you out of being mouthy."

"You tried."

"Lord Dirthamen has asked for you."

My heart jumps. "Oh?" I ask, voice staying calm.

"You have a better handle on your emotions, at the very least," she says. "Yes. A raven came today, bearing a message. He says he wants to see you."

I pause. "Why?"

"I suppose you'd better go and find out."

It has been seven decades and then some since I've last seen Dirthamen. I was but a child then, and Dirthamen was still but a king.

Now, he is a god.

I wait in a small chamber within one of his temples, examining every detail of the room and cataloguing it. It's more habit than anything. Part of my training — always know the room you are in, always be aware, so that you may never be caught off-guard.

The tell-tale whisper of a weapon being unsheathed fills the silence.

I turn, have a split second to register the rush of wind, the blur of a shape.

A blade flashes. I draw mine.

Our daggers lock, metal ringing, and I meet my assailant's eyes. Violet. Everything within me stills.

"Impressive," says Dirthamen, retracting his dagger and sheathing it, the enchanted rings on his fingers catching the light as he does. I sheathe my dagger in return, mouth drying. He is lightly armoured today, dark hair now longer, almost reaching his hips.

I fall to one knee and bow my head. "Ma Venuralas."

"Rise."

His voice is as I recall, warm and rich and honeyed. I rise. He smiles at me.

"Hello," Dirthamen greets, as if I'm an old friend. "I apologise for pulling you out from your training so abruptly."

I only nod, unsure of what to say.

"I hope I did not tear you away from any close friends," he says.

"I won't be missed."

"Oh? Why is that?"

His stare is steady. I usually have no trouble maintaining eye contact. In fact, it can be used for intimidation, but Dirthamen makes it difficult. I feel as if the correct course of action is to look away, but is that disrespectful? Does that show weakness?

"Communication and cooperation were encouraged on the island," I say. "They're important skills, but competition still lingered. Envy was detrimental to performance."

He tilts his head. Go on, it says.

"Forming any meaningful connections was futile," I continue. "Power plays were already prevalent among my peers. I navigated them just fine, but I was still greatly disliked."

"How come?"

"Because I was better than them."

Dirthamen regards me, face blank, aura hidden.

"It's no boast," I say. "I am the best on that island, discounting our instructors, but I cannot ascertain how I will hold up against your agents. I will be at a severe disadvantage due to the disparity in experience. And I also have trouble controlling my magic. The output is strong, so is the precision, but not so in terms of restraint."

He stays quiet, frowns slightly. There's a certain weight to his silence, an expectation to be filled.

Keep going.

"I know what I'm good at and what I'm not good at, and my control is admittedly poor. Why have you called me, ma Venuralas? I have about three decades of training left."

His neutrality finally breaks as he smiles. I like it. It is subtle, soft, and gives his eyes a mischievous light. "Thalamya has reported that you have been an exceptional student."

She has?

Dirthamen chuckles. "Is that so surprising?"

I frown. "Somewhat. I assumed she disapproves of me."

"She does."

"Oh."

"But I believe the disapproval is more concerned with your personality than your

skills.” He paces the room in measured strides, examining the mosaics on the wall. I don’t move, only follow him with my eyes. “She believes you are ready in all aspects.” He looks back at me over his shoulder. “Save for the issue with control.”

I drop my gaze. Is he disappointed? Is that why I’ve been called here?

“Show me,” he says.

My gaze snaps up. His smile is gone, but there’s a glint in his eyes.

“I may wreck the room,” I say.

He looks at me, waiting. A few beats pass.

I murmur my assent and close my eyes, calling on that coil of magical power within me. It is the culmination of all that I am, a force that shapes the Fade into what I wish.

And I unravel the spool.

The surge of power fills me, swelling within my bones, flooding me until I feel as if I’m a walking storm. I force myself to breathe through it. My skin feels as if it will crack and I’ll disperse and fracture in the aftermath, my ears filling with a roar. It clouds my head, my senses.

But Dirthamen’s voice cuts through it, clear, a strike of lightning in the darkness of a thunderstorm.

“Reel it in,” he says. I obey.

My magic wishes to flare further, to slip through my fingers, but I grip harder than it’s slipping. I’m too aware of Dirthamen watching me. This is a test; it must be.

It’s a slow process, like dragging a waterlogged carcass through a bog, but I manage it.

I open my eyes, lightheaded, body heavy.

The room’s braziers have been extinguished, mosaic tiles from the wall litter the cracked floor, singe marks radiate out from me, and decorations have been knocked to the ground. Dirthamen stands in the middle of the wreckage. I expect him to give me a pitying look. Maybe one of disapproval, distaste, disdain. It won’t be the first time and it won’t be the last.

He releases an awed breath instead, regarding the destruction around us.

His awe falls on me.

“Beautiful,” he says.

Warmth fills me.

I would raze a city for him.

“Are you afraid of that power?” he asks.

“I fear nothing,” I almost say, but I pause and make myself think. “I’m afraid of losing

myself if I lose control of it,” I say instead. “It’s too much. It’s hard to hold, and it’s destructive.”

It gets terrible, some days. Sometimes my power surges to the point that I feel as if I will shatter, destroy myself along with everything around me.

Dirthamen waves a hand, and I watch, my turn to be in awe, as he undoes my destruction. The tiles return to form their mosaics, the singe marks lift, the cracks in the ground mend, the decorations return to their rightful positions. I don’t even bother to hide my aura of surprise.

He smiles. “I can undo whatever destruction you cause,” he says, “and I can stop you from destroying yourself.”

My eyes widen.

“But it is true, you need to learn control.” He holds a hand to his chest and still manages to make a gesture of humility look regal. “I will teach you.”

I try not to gawk. “Ma Venuralas?”

“I have gone through the same struggle. My power would slip from my grasp, but I have learned how to control it. Now, I never slip.” The hand over his heart drops and he regards me with unabashed curiosity. “But this will be a continuous struggle for you. You are Change. There is a limit to how much power you can amass before it proves calamitous for you. I will help you remain in that peak without falling into Entropy. I will not let you decay.”

I want to believe him.

“You said it yourself,” I say. “This will be a continuous struggle. You’re asking to be stuck with me for eternity.” I smile self-deprecatingly. “Are you sure about that decision?”

He smiles back. “I’m sure.”

Lavellan staggered, the Veilfire torch almost slipping from his grasp. Cole caught and steadied him.

Even though it was just a memory, the echoes of his power’s surge and its subsequent retreat still jarred him.

And Dirthamen...

Lavellan closed his eyes, breathed in the stale air. The Well of Sorrows rushed in his head, a soothing lap of waves against the shore. Dirthamen’s voice echoed in his thoughts.

Beautiful.

Lavellan shook it off. Or tried to. He was usually successful, but this time, it clung to him.

“Let’s go,” he croaked.

Lavellan knelt in the stale water so that he could reach the low gate and pick the lock. They entered another, smaller chamber.

He approached the glyph by the wall.

“There is a spell,” I say, but stop.

Dirthamen looks up from the letter he is writing and places his quill down. “Yes?”

I struggle for the right words. “You discovered blood magic.”

He smiles. “Indeed.”

Dirthamen is the eldest of Mythal and Elgar’nan, womb-born, though he has carried a spirit of Purpose since birth through to young adulthood, but Purpose later separated from him and formed Falon’Din.

Point being, Dirthamen was one of the first to be born as a corporeal entity, and this corporeality has given him an affinity for blood magic. The consequence of practicing blood magic is that Dirthamen cannot follow Falon’Din far into the Beyond since blood magic inhibits him, but it’s a small price to pay. In the hands of a skilled mage, blood magic’s volatility can be controlled, and its raw power can be harnessed.

And this spell...

“Could you... bind me to you?” I ask, tentatively offering the idea. “If ever I can’t control myself and the other methods fail, it can be used as a last resort.”

Dirthamen leans back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the table as he appraises me.

“And forming such a bond will also allow me to lend you some of my power in return,” Dirthamen says slowly, considering.

“I’m more focused on the restraining part of it,” I admit. “I think more power might not do me any good, anyway.”

His eyes shimmer. “It is fascinating how many chains you accept of your own accord.”

“So long as the chain leads back to you.”

The declaration strikes him silent, but I can’t discern what emotion is within his eyes and his aura betrays nothing, as always.

“Loyal only to me,” he murmurs.

“The thought pleases you.”

“It does.”

"You're not very good at sharing."

"You don't want to be shared."

I quiet at that.

"The binding?" I ask instead of continuing that topic.

Dirthamen hums. "I will," he agrees. My shoulders slump in relief, a small weight lifting.

"Thank you."

"Inquisitor?"

Lavellan jolted, looked over his shoulder at Cassandra, who was standing by the small gate.

"I'm sorry?" he asked, his own voice sounding strange to his ears.

"I was asking if we should get going." She frowned. "Are you unwell?"

He licked his dry lips, felt faintly disconnected. Solas was staring at him. Lavellan forced his coherency to return.

"No. It's fine," he said. "Let's get going." His vallaslin tingled on his chest.

No, wait. He had no vallaslin on his chest.

Lavellan pursed his lips and kept going. Ellana bumped his shoulder as they walked, and Lavellan could only give her a wan smile in return.

They entered the opposite wing of the main sanctuary and navigated the dim chambers, squeezing through archways and corridors. Lavellan's undershirt was soaked and his ribs were throbbing from the Arcane Horror they'd faced earlier.

He followed the tolling in his head and arrived at a crypt. The glyph glimmered on the space of wall between a row of niches meant to house mummified remains. The niches were empty.

"Hanon," said Ellana, "my pack is heavy from dead priest organs. Even morbid curiosity can only take me so far."

"You can give some to Solas."

"My pack is full," said Solas.

"Bullshit," said Ellana. "Show me!"

While the two of them argued about who had to carry the organs, Lavellan passed the Veilfire over the glyph.

It reached for him, greedy, *hungry*—

The actors hurriedly change their hair with magic, root to tip, altering colour and length and texture, and go back out at their cue.

I slip away from backstage and return to one of the private booths with a clear view of the main arena. They're currently re-enacting one of Andruil's exploits. Illusions flicker across the stage.

"Were you exploring?" asks Dirthamen. He has no servants attending to him, unlike his siblings in their own booths.

"A little." I hold up the pitcher of wine and platter of fruit I'm carrying. "While I was getting these."

Dirthamen flicks his gaze coolly towards me. "I brought you here to watch with me, not attend to me."

"I can do both. And these aren't poisoned. I made sure of it. I'll take the first sip if you'd like."

He stares at me.

I smile. "Ma Venuralas, I thought you were watching?"

Dirthamen returns his attention to the play. "What wine?"

"Adhal'gra. Spiced."

"Thank you for being concise. Sylaise goes on enough about soil and season and composition."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about wine, nor do I care to, admittedly." I pour him a glass and take a quick sip to check for poison. "It's just grapes. But angrier."

His lips twitch. "I'll tell that to Sylaise the next time she irritates to me. Angry grapes."

"Wrathful grapes." I can't sense any poison within the wine. I wipe the rim with a cloth and give it to Dirthamen, then pluck a normal grape from the platter. "Here are non-wrathful grapes."

He gives the grape an unimpressed look. "Do not feed me. I find it patronising."

"Being fed?"

"I can feed myself."

"It's an act of service," I say, biting back a smile, and offer him the platter instead. He takes a strawberry just to be contrary.

We watch the play again. One of the actors changes their mask to denote a character shift.

“Imagine if you could just change your face,” I muse. “Would be faster.”

“Difficult to learn and execute,” says Dirthamen, “but it's an intriguing thought.”

The play continues, but my thoughts wander. Shapeshifting is a difficult art, but my nature as Change has given me an instinctive grasp of it. Besides shifting into another creature, a branch of shapeshifting can also involve the alteration of the body's structure, but the casting process for this is even more time-consuming than the former and requires extensive study. It isn't an art pursued by many.

What if I take that a step further? What if I can make it less time-consuming to cast? Instantaneous? Change faces as easily as an actor changes masks?

Dirthamen eyes me but says nothing.

I have done it.

After decades of research, finally.

The bones and muscles of my head ache in the aftermath of the spell, and when I look in the mirror, a different face looks back. My eyes remain the same, golden colour, but I can't do anything about them since any change I apply to them wears off over time. An illusion will be simpler if I have to mask them.

I need to master this. Study different faces, catalogue what differentiates them. For now, I'm struggling to make the skin colour and complexion uniform, but with a little practice, I'll be able to manage it.

I know I will.

I pass my hands over my true face and it changes, bones and muscles shifting, the wavy black hair just past my jaws shortening to red curls, olive skin lightening to a freckled complexion. I pass my hand back over it and the face changes again. It still aches, but I can work on that.

What matters is that I've succeeded.

I rush to my feet, step over the books and scrolls I've spread haphazardly around me, and head for the Vir Dirthara's nearest eluvian. I barely register the journey from the Crossroads to Dirthamen's wing in the Evanuris' palace, too caught up in my excitement.

After a short moment of searching, I find him in his garden under the shade of a tree, leaning against the trunk with his eyes closed and his hands folded over his lap.

I pass beneath the wisteria I'd planted and stop in front of him.

His eyes snap open and he moves fast, a scorpion's strike. I let him grab my collar and pin me against the tree, his dagger resting on my throat.

“Explain yourself,” he says, voice even and expression calm, but his eyes are as steely

as the dagger. I merely smile, too giddy with success to mind the blade biting into my skin.

He pauses, his eyes searching mine, violet on gold. The steel in his gaze fades in favour of recognition.

“Hello, ma Venuralas,” I say. At my voice, his recognition grows. I can’t alter my voice yet, but I can study how to modify the structure of my vocal cords later. “Remember when we had that talk a few decades ago about changing faces?”

Dirthamen lowers the dagger and eases his grip on my collar, cradles my cheek instead. His hostility completely fades. I don’t bother to hide the restless mixture of elation and triumph in my aura and expression. He doesn’t urge me to control it.

“Show me your true face,” he says. I pass my hand over my face and he watches with rapt attention as it settles into the features that he’s familiar with, shifting beneath his hand.

I lean into his touch, eyes squinting from my smile. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Dirthamen says nothing, keeps staring at me.

Then, he smiles back.

“Hungry,” Dirthamen murmurs. “You’re insatiable.”

His head flooded with knowledge and decades’ worth of research, but strangely, they didn’t overwhelm him. They settled instead, a delicate descent into water, leaving the surface undisturbed. No, of course it wouldn’t overwhelm him. He already knew it.

Hungry.

The touch on his cheek lingered and his lips tasted faintly of wine. Lavellan didn’t shake either off.

Insatiable.

Something was abuzz beneath his skin. The first tap of a beak against the inner shell of its egg.

“You have to slow down,” whispered Cole beside him.

He couldn’t access most of his power, locked away, because he couldn’t remember his time in the Fade. But once he did...

Cole stared at him.

Lavellan faced his companions. Solas finished putting one of the urns in his pack with an unhappy twist to his lips while Ellana smiled smugly.

“Are you two ready?” asked Lavellan.

Solas and Ellana looked at him, then stared, didn’t respond.

Lavellan frowned. “What?”

Ellana smiled at him, but it looked hesitant. "Maybe we should take a bit of a break?"

"What for?"

"You do not look well," said Solas, expression unreadable.

Lavellan grinned. "Actually, I feel great. Shall we? Two organs left."

He didn't wait for their response and traipsed on ahead into the darkness, something in him burning, his heartbeat seemingly matching the Veilfire's flickers. The green light it was reflecting on the slick stone walls almost looked as if it were guiding him.

Hungry.

Cassandra kicked down a portion of the wall at Lavellan's request and the weak stones collapsed, revealing a hidden chamber behind it.

"Nice kick," said Ellana.

"Thank you."

Lavellan pushed at the stone around the collapsed section to make sure it wouldn't crumble on them, then entered. It was just a small room, sparsely decorated. Most of it was flooded. No matter.

He lit the glyph on the nearby wall.

Dirthamen is at his desk, head buried in his hands. His room is dim, the large window's glass tinted with darkness. The shadows in the corner of the room writhe.

I approach softly, carefully.

"Ma Venuralas," I whisper.

He doesn't answer.

I stop beside his chair and hover my hand over his shoulder. When he doesn't rebuff me, I rest my hand on his shoulder gently.

"Loud?" I ask. The secrets in his head must be whispering up a storm if it's incapacitated him like this.

"Manageable," he says, voice rough.

"Give some to me."

"You are already holding five as of this moment."

"They aren't too terrible at the moment. Dismissible. I'll visit one of the temples later to impart it upon the priests."

"I will give you five," says Dirthamen.

"Fifteen."

"My raven, I believe they call that a lack of self-preservation." Dirthamen raises his head and makes to stand but I firm my grip on his shoulder. He pauses, stares at me.

"I can take it," I say, determined.

The only sound in the room is our soft breathing.

Dirthamen closes his eyes and sighs.

"Ten," he says. I nod.

He reaches out a hand. I lower myself to one knee and bow my head.

"Offload these as soon as you can," says Dirthamen.

"Vin, ma Venuralas."

He rests his hand on my head and the secrets pour into my mind, fills every corner of it and swells, an overlapping screeching of whispers. My breathing turns ragged and I focus instead on the weight of the hand on my head. I scrunch my eyes shut. My head feels as if it'll split.

After a century of seconds, the flooding stops, but now, the inside of my mind is a cluster of jagged whispering. My eyes open. Everything is blurry. My head throbs like a fresh bruise.

Dirthamen slumps in his seat, exhausted, but his expression is less strained. He cups my cheek and brushes his thumb beneath my eyes. It smears with something wet. He says something. I stare up at him, dazed, trying to read his lips, but my head is too full of fog and screaming. He speaks once more. His lips shape around the word I can recognise — my name.

I mumble something incomprehensible in return and gently rest my head against his thigh. His presence at least helps with the screaming whispers, and the stabbing in my head becomes bearable.

He runs his fingers through my hair soothingly.

"How did you know there was a hidden room?" asked Solas.

Lavellan blinked slowly at him, head feeling stuffed. "What?"

He stared at Lavellan, eyes glinting from the Veilfire.

Lavellan's head slowly cleared. The Well of Sorrows now seemed like a pleasant guest in comparison to the secrets. Those secrets were compacted information, kept together by potent magic, which caused the mental strain. They would have induced madness in most people if kept for too long. No wonder the priests had mutilated their High Priest.

The Well operated on the same magic, devised by Dirthamen, but it was less potent. Gentler on the

mind.

He never thought the day would come where he'd say that the Well was gentler on the mind.

"I understand you are curious, lethallin," said Solas, "but hearing this temple's secrets may cause more harm than good."

"I'm alright," Lavellan assured, smiling faintly. "Thank you for your concern. Come on, one left."

A strange void was growing in his chest.

He missed the soothing fingers combing through his hair.

Lavellan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

do you hear him calling?

The last organ ended up being a whole head.

He lugged the (surprisingly light) head along with him and waded his way to the last glyph.

“I want you to work with Fen’Harel.”

I stare at Dirthamen. He is looking out of his large window as usual, his back to me.

“The Forgotten are moving,” continues Dirthamen. “Mother has convinced him to investigate the matter since he is welcome among the Forgotten and their followers.”

“Ma Venuralas, we cannot be sure of Fen’Harel’s allegiance. He could be working with the Forgotten.”

He chuckles. “I doubt it. My brother hates us all too much to choose a side. I would be more worried about his willingness to act.”

“He’s not your brother.”

“Because he is not of my blood?” He turns to me, raises a brow. “He is lethallin to me. He is still family.”

Him and his unerring loyalty to his family. I huff, but it’s tinted with fondness.

“Besides,” Dirthamen continues, “that is why I want you to work with him. I trust him, but he has a habit of getting himself into more trouble than he’s worth.”

“You want me... to babysit the Wolf?”

“I want you to keep him out of trouble and aid him with the investigation. He is more likely to accept help from me since out of everyone in the family, we are on better terms. You have also worked with him before, briefly, while he was still a general.”

“I hated every second of it.” Fen’Harel is hot-headed, always on the verge of another self-righteous jeremiad, and difficult to work with.

“Yet you bore it. I need your perseverance.” He walks to his table and pours himself a glass of wine, but he doesn’t drink for a while, merely regards it in his hand. “Report back to me.”

I watch him, tilt my head, the pieces falling into place. “You’re doing two things at once.”

Dirthamen takes a sip. “Keep an eye on him. I don’t want him in danger. His temper

has landed him in trouble too many times."

"I remember," I mutter. "He doesn't seem to realise that he's not the one who cleans up the messes he leaves behind. I do. I'm the one who has to pick up the pieces after his tantrums and right them."

"At my behest," he says, almost teasing. "Such a terrible man you work for, tasking you with this."

"You're doing your job, and I'm doing mine. Even if you don't order me to, I'd do it anyway, I suspect."

Dirthamen hums and looks out at Arlathan beyond the window once more. "Because you love the People."

Felassan's words echo in my head.

"When it's the People against the People," I repeat softly, "who do I protect?"

Dirthamen looks back at me and the silence stretches.

I tense. I shouldn't have—

"Difficult, isn't it?" asks Dirthamen unexpectedly. I blink. "It's... relieving to have another realise this. My family can't seem to understand this dilemma, save Mother."

I look out the window as well.

"I did not order you to love the People, you did that of your own accord," says Dirthamen. "I am also aware that you sometimes go beyond your orders so you can help them."

"You disapprove?"

"No. It's rather admirable."

I purse my lips, ears heating, and turn my head away.

He places his goblet down and approaches me, cups my cheek. "I need you. You're the only one I can entrust family matters to."

My gaze falls in deference. "Alright," I say with a sigh. "At least I can try to stop him from making a mess."

"Fen'Harel," I greet.

"Solas," he corrects, eyeing me with clear disapproval.

"Don't cause me trouble," I say.

"Likewise." He turns and starts walking. "Don't fall behind."

"If we're going to be forced to work with one another, you're going to have to learn to be more cooperative."

He smiles sharply. "The only forced party is you. I am here at nobody's directive but mine."

I smile back. "Ma Venuralas, Mythal sent you here."

His expression shutters in cold disdain at the address. "That does not change anything. I am here as a favour; you are here because of orders. There is a clear difference."

"Discipline."

"Level of critical thinking."

My mood darkens. For Dirthamen. Do this for Dirthamen.

Lavellan grimaced. Well, he wasn't surprised that they hadn't gotten along too well in the beginning. But that was how it had begun. How had it progressed? There was still a large blank in the middle, and come to think of it, how had he even felt about Solas back in Elvhenan? Without the influence of his current emotions and history with Solas?

"Thank the Creators, that's the last of them," sighed Ellana.

They returned to the central sanctuary and descended the stairs into the flooded lower area, made their way to the altar at the front. Lavellan placed the head down on its respective pedestal while Ellana and Solas placed the rest.

After, they stood back and Solas glanced at him.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "There is no telling where this ritual will lead us."

"We need to find Dirthamen's Wisdom," said Lavellan. "The Venatori haven't reached this area yet. We can't let them get it, whatever it is." He turned away. "I'll be damned if I let Corypheus keep touching and destroying what isn't his."

Solas frowned, whether in agreement or contemplation, Lavellan didn't know. He then turned and spun his staff, gathered ambient magic, and slammed it down. Green light rippled outwards and the pedestals gleamed green, the temperature dropping. The air shimmered, wavered.

It pressed in on them.

Lavellan tensed.

"I told you it's angry," said Cole.

They backed away from the pedestals, weapons out. The green threads of light turned blue as magic gathered above the altar.

And shattered.

A despair demon manifested, shrieking, cowed head bent in eternal misery. Its teeth-grinding cries scraped against his chest, but beneath it... Beneath it, he could discern its hysterical whispers.

Why? Why? I tried to protect them. I tried to save them. Dirthamen has fallen!

Its attention fell on Lavellan.

Lavellan stilled.

You!

It surged, emaciated hands reaching for him, moving faster than any Despair demon they'd faced. It knocked him onto the water. Ice settled in his veins. The enchantment from the bone amulet triggered and a barrier sprung around him.

It screamed at Lavellan, claws battering against the barrier. There was nothing else on its face besides a mouth with two rows of teeth.

How dare you return!

Lavellan stared back in horror.

"Hanon!" cried Ellana.

A stream of fire knocked the Despair demon off him. Cassandra hauled him up.

"Focus!" she said.

He shook himself out of it and broke a flask of fire over himself with a snarl.

The Despair demon coated itself in a barrier and shot lances of ice at him. Lavellan wove through them as he charged, closed the distance with his hook and chain and swept forward with a war cry. He buried his daggers into its neck. His momentum carried him further and they crashed into the water.

You! You! Your fault, your fault!

Corpses rose from the water and shambled towards them.

"Take care of them!" he told his companions, fighting to keep the demon pinned down. "I've got this one."

The Highest One screamed and clawed at him. Lavellan dodged its unsuccessful attempts, kept the daggers firmly in place.

Traitor! Traitor! Undeserving of our Deity's love!

Rage swelled in his chest. Traitor? Lavellan hadn't betrayed Dirthamen. He *wouldn't*.

"Quiet!" he snapped.

He pulled a dagger out and let go of the other. His free hand caught the demon's wrist as it clawed at him, and he cut its hand off with a decisive slash. It shrieked. Lavellan cut its other hand off. The enchantment on his dagger made the process all too easy.

"You should have stayed dead," hissed Lavellan. "I never liked you."

Flashes of hateful looks. Envy.

"I am the Highest One. I outrank you."

"I have no interest in entertaining your poor attempts at competition. Leave me be."

It screeched.

Lavellan stuffed one of its severed hands into its mouth and pressed the tail of his burning coat against its face. It thrashed.

"You were no match for me then," Lavellan taunted, "and you're no match for me now."

Curse you, Isha'belsal'in. I hope you suffer as we have. As you've made our Deity suffer.

Its struggling waned.

Our poor, poor Deity... How he grieved...

The Highest One stopped moving.

No more whispers echoed in Lavellan's mind.

The Highest One dissipated into wisps of magic and returned to the Fade, left Lavellan kneeling in the dank water, his heartbeat loud in his ears as he panted.

He wasn't a traitor. He was certain of it. As certain as he was that the sun rose and set every morning and evening. But what had he done that made the Highest One think he was?

Lavellan pushed himself up, catching his breath. His hands were shaking. The rage was still coursing through him. He looked back at his companions just as Cassandra stabbed the last of the corpses.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked, reeling in the emotions that had been heightened by the adrenaline.

"You kept the main threat sufficiently distracted," said Cassandra. She frowned at him. "Are *you* alright, Inquisitor?"

"I'm fine, I've faced worse demons before."

Her frown only deepened.

A shimmer of light caught their attention and their heads turned towards the source. The large, locked door in the sanctuary gleamed, light flooding through the grooves on its surface as a magic circle flashed above it.

The raven-cloaked figure reappeared by the doors and waited.

Lavellan sheathed his daggers with a grim finality. Vergala cried in the skies above.

"Come on," he said and headed for the doors. His focus narrowed, the cloaked figure at its centre. There were answers behind that door. He was close to something, he could feel it, and something in him was reaching, like a hand slipping through the bars of their cage and straining to retrieve the key just beyond its grasp.

Once they neared the doors, the cloaked figure walked through it. The pull within him grew stronger.

Lavellan took a deep breath, and pushed the doors open.

They entered a small chamber that was in better condition than the rest of the temple. The roof was still missing, but at least it wasn't flooded. Lavellan scrutinised the twin statues of howling wolves against the far wall.

"Fen'Harel again," murmured Ellana as she stopped beside him.

"Is that surprising?" asked Cassandra. "I apologise, I am unfamiliar with your pantheon."

"Nothing in our lore connects Dirthamen to the Dread Wolf," said Ellana. "It's... interesting, is all."

"A lot of things have been lost," said Lavellan. Dirthamen had been one of Solas' most trusted among the Evanuris, and Dirthamen had cared for Solas. So much so that he'd deployed Lavellan to *babysit* him. Maybe Dirthamen had been paying homage. That, or wolves were just symbols of protection and Solas' wolf moniker had been a nod to his previous post as a general.

"It's not just that," said Ellana. "Did you notice that all of the Evanuris had a presence here? As murals, statues, or symbols? But none of Dirthamen himself."

"Loyalty to family," Lavellan murmured. "This temple is showing the people he'd valued most: his family."

Solas looked away. Lavellan pursed his lips.

"But what about himself?" asked Ellana.

"This temple represents him. And within him, he holds these people dear."

There was a chest resting at the centre of the chamber. Lavellan approached it and pried it open, and the pulling sensation within him vanished. His companions peered over his shoulders and looked at its contents.

It was a shield.

"Dirthamen's Wisdom is a shield?" asked Ellana. "Not what I was expecting."

Lavellan picked it up gingerly and felt the faint tingle on his skin from the magic still imbued within it. Visions flashed in his head. A headache pulsed. He stared at his reflection on the shield

—

Spirits clamour to watch the decisive battle between the elves and the Earth, but they're here for the event. I'm only here to watch one person.

He is a terrible and beautiful vision, striking from the shadows in his dark armour, sword and shield gleaming silver. His aura pulses with sickly-sweet bloodlust.

Yet, he is so... careful. Clever. Cunning. Methodical as he leads his army and cuts down their enemies.

I've been watching Dirthamen for a while now, ever since he crossed into the Beyond to search for his twin. I expected to eventually grow bored of him, expected that he'll fail, but he's never failed. Or if he does, he twists it into a victory and it never feels like a failure by the end of it. He'll pull a string, its consequence not immediately seen, until one day, you realise the ocean has dried out over time without your noticing. He knows what variable needs to change, how much it should change, when it should change. This war has brought out these qualities even further.

The Earth eventually falls, poisoned, and its children retreat into the stones. The war is won. Thanks to Dirthamen's strategies.

The elves soak in their triumph and relief, but Dirthamen slips away from the aftermath without bothering to tend to his injuries and retreats to a hillside to stare at the stars.

What does he think about when he looks at them? What is he thinking now? Why isn't he resting?

I stay a considerable distance away, lingering beneath a tree. I stare at the stars too.

This realm is loathsome, and I dislike lingering within it, but I concede that the stars are one of the few beautiful things about it.

I've always thought of this world as unchanging. Stifling. I could never understand why the others have decided to cross and gain a body. But if the reason is because they saw themselves in this world, because they saw the different ways they could be, the endless possibilities of their evolution... then I understand. He has opened a path. He has made a path. I want to walk this path that he has painstakingly dug into the soil with his bare hands.

I want him to show me how I can become a new, impossible thing. I want him to mould me with his clever, cunning, careful hands.

I want to see.

I want.

"You have been following me for a while," says Dirthamen and I start. He looks at me. "Ever since I went into the Beyond to search for Falon'Din."

I nod.

"Why?"

I pause, then drift away from the tree and forward towards him. The shield still strapped to his arm glints from my golden light. He looks weary. He should rest.

"I see it," I say. "You turn me into art."

He stares. Violet eyes.

"Who are you?" he asks.

The stars burn above us, unerring. He is worthy of me.

"I am Change."

Lavellan released a shuddering breath.

"The preservative magic of this artefact is immense," said Solas. "Even now, thousands of years later, the Veil sings clear, though worn." He looked around. "I suspect it is why the temple still stands."

Lavellan's grip tightened around the shield, a wave of sentimentality battering him. "If we take it..." The image of them standing on that hillside beneath the stars refused to leave his mind. "If we take it, nothing will keep this temple together. It will—" Fall.

Something in him knew that this temple was Dirthamen's very first temple. This place held so much significance.

Lavellan's shoulders slumped. "We can't take it."

"We must," murmured Solas.

"But—" He caught himself, forced himself to calm, and turned away with a bitter press of his lips.

"Hanon," said Ellana and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulders, "we can't leave it here. The Venatori will come and take it."

But you don't understand, this temple will fall! It's— the only thing left—

Heart twisting, Lavellan passed the shield to Cassandra.

"Have it," said Lavellan, sullen. "It'll be in good hands with you."

"Inquisitor, this is— I cannot accept this. It belongs to your people."

Please, just... Don't let this disappear just yet. "It's been here for millennia. Carry it until we beat Corypheus. Let it taste battle one final time, then we'll give it to the Dalish. Please?"

Cassandra hesitated, but gently, she took it off him. He almost hesitated in passing it on, but he forced himself to let go.

He smiled. "Thank you."

She frowned quizzically at him, but she nodded and strapped it to her arm since her old shield was still on her back. Solas kept his gaze level.

"You disagree?" asked Lavellan.

Solas frowned further. "No," he said. "I— No, you are right, let it see use. Allow me to examine it and ensure it is safe."

Lavellan nodded. "If you please."

Solas and Cassandra went off to a corner of the room flooded with moonlight to converse about the shield while Ellana studied the inscriptions on the walls. Lavellan stood in the middle, lost. No, this— This couldn't be it.

He turned his head. The cloaked figure was standing by a furtive part of the small room.

Cole stopped beside Lavellan. “He mourned,” said Cole. “Growing grief gripped tight and terrible as he locked it away. Wrote in the inner walls of his bones. It’ll stay but he’s gone.”

Something in Lavellan twisted. He approached the wall cautiously and the raven-cloaked figure assimilated with the shadows.

Lavellan knelt and ran his fingers over the tiled surface until his fingers caught on an edge. A loose tile. He pried it off. A soft breath left him as he discovered that the surrounding tiles could also be pulled out. They revealed an ornate panel carved in a way that allowed him to grab it for purchase. Lavellan grabbed and pulled.

It resisted. He planted his foot against the wall and heaved.

It slid out without a sound. Another chest. While the sides were ornate, the flat top was blank with an Elvish character carved into its surface.

Lavellan, it read.

Ice washed over him, and his limbs froze.

“Cole,” he whispered, “that’s my clan name.”

“Is it?”

“What do you—”

“Ma Venuralas, I have chosen my name.”

Dirthamen smiles and gestures for me to sit. He offers a paper and quill and I write out the characters of a series of words. I haven’t chosen a name even after seven decades, refusing to choose one while training on the island because I wanted to wait until I see him again. He’s here now.

Lana. Venuralas. El’u. Elan.[^{\[1\]}](#)

I take pieces from each of the words and reassemble them into a unique symbol — my name.

Lavellan.

Dirthamen tilts his head and hums. “Lavellan,” he says.

My heart swells with joy.

“Lavellan,” I say.

“Lavellan,” says Dirthamen again and I like the way his voice shapes around it. His violet eyes glimmer. “I like it.”

I grin.

He withdrew his hand from the chest, his breaths too loud in the room.

“Lavellan,” he murmured, his voice sounding foreign to his own ears. Lavellan closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands.

Somehow, someone had named their clan after him, and somehow, he'd found himself within it. The middle was still hazy. From Elvhen to Dalish. How?

Dirthamen's voice echoed in his head.

“Lavellan.”

Something slotted into place. Lavellan felt like he could see himself better, his edges more defined, features clearer.

He eyed the chest. His name was on it so it must be his. Lavellan felt along its edges, looked for locks but found none. Before he could get frustrated, another magic circle flashed on top, overlaying his name, followed by a soft *click*. He pulled at the lid. It lifted.

Lavellan opened it and stared at the contents.

A cloak of raven feathers.

The world faded into dull ringing in his ears. Lavellan took the cloak with shaky hands, the inside lined with soft fabric, but the outside... He ran his fingers over it. The feathers were real.

Asunara hands Lavellan a package and he frowns at it.

“A present,” she explains. “From us.”

Lavellan looks back over to the rest of the El'amelan, who wait with a smile. He opens the package and his eyes widen at the raven cloak.

“Are these real feathers?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says. “Feathers from the ravens that have died in service or those who have reached the end of their lives.”

He smiles. “Taking the saying ‘Passing on the mantle’ a little too literally.”

She laughs and rubs the back of her neck. “It will also distinguish you as the Ras'virelan,” she continues. “Should you ever wish to be recognised immediately. Let Elvhenan fear the man in the cloak of raven feathers, let Elvhenan know exactly who walks among them. Let them know it is Ras'virelan, that it is Isha'belsal'in.”

Lavellan grins at the rest of them. “You all just want me to wear this because you tire of me playing tricks on you while wearing different faces.”

“You say the most hurtful things, Ras,” says Bel'vedir, the El'amelan's scryer and beastkeeper. The very first member and Lavellan's second-in-command.

“I mean it with affection, Vedir.” Lavellan runs his hands over the feathers. “But alright. It would be remiss of me not to wear it.” He offers it to Asunara. “Will you do me the honour?”

“The honour is all mine.” She takes it and steps behind him, drapes it over his shoulders, and pulls the hood up over his head. It’s warm. “To the ends of the world, we will follow you.”

His eyes watered, but he blinked it away. Lavellan unfurled the raven cloak and put it on.

It felt like coming home.

He relaxed, wrapped it tighter around himself and pulled the hood up, sighing in contentment at the drape of its warmth.

“You held your hand out, believed in them when nobody would, and they would have done anything for you,” said Cole.

There was more in the chest. Lavellan reached inside and pulled out twin daggers, their blades broken. His hands wrapped around the hilt, familiar. There were schematics for the daggers in the chest too.

And in between all of that, so small he’d almost missed it, was a box.

Lavellan picked it up. It fit within his palms. He opened it and his eyes widened.

An earring.

“I have something for you,” is the first thing Dirthamen says the moment Lavellan enters Dirthamen’s private chambers. Lavellan changes his face to his true one. Always the true one around Dirthamen, as per his request.

“A mission?” Lavellan asks and stops in front of his desk.

“No.” Dirthamen rolls the scroll in his hand and places it back in its cylinder. He stands and tips his head. Lavellan goes to his side.

“For research?”

“A gift.”

Lavellan stops. “A gift.”

“You look surprised at the notion. Have I been this remiss?”

He shakes his head, bewildered. “I— No, you’ve been more than generous. It doesn’t have to come in the form of physical gifts.”

“Perhaps,” says Dirthamen. “But I saw it and thought of you.”

Lavellan swallows his joy, fighting back the pull of his lips. Dirthamen reaches into his robe to retrieve a small box wrapped in smooth satin, and offers it to Lavellan. He accepts it, gently unwraps the satin, and opens the box.

His breath catches.

Inside rests an earring. A small amethyst cut into a teardrop is nestled within the delicate metal curlicues of golden vines. He can feel the magic imbued within it. It's a clear declaration. I am important.

"Ma Venuralas, this is beautiful," whispers Lavellan, picking it up tentatively. If he wears it in public, it'll be a signal to others around him that crossing him is unwise. Something this magically potent is essentially a ticket granting him easier access to the higher echelons of the nobility. "Are you certain?"

"You said amethysts are your favourite."

Lavellan holds the earring up, the amethyst catching the light.

"It's perfect." Lavellan smiles. "Thank you."

He smiles back. "I'm glad you like it."

Lavellan pulls his hand back and stares at the earring, his smile fading.

"Is something the matter?" asks Dirthamen.

"This does bring up the issue of favouritism. If I wear it..." Too many people in Dirthamen's court already whisper about Lavellan's rank, about how it isn't earned by merit. Such rumours are dangerous. If the wrong people hear about it, they may see it as a weakness on Dirthamen's part and seek to exploit it. It's also a matter of pride. Lavellan knows how hard he's worked, how hard he continues to work, and he dislikes the restless mouths undermining his efforts.

"It will be difficult to identify you since you change faces often, and I've ensured that the magic within it cannot be traced back to me."

"It's the principle of the matter."

"You are under no obligation to wear it. I simply wished to give you a token of my appreciation."

Lavellan looks down. "I did not mean to come across as ungrateful."

"You did not. I understand your concerns. If it's going to cause complications, I can take it back—"

Lavellan closes his hand around the earring possessively just as Dirthamen reaches for it.

A brief span of silence stretches between them.

Dirthamen lowers his hand and laughs.

Lavellan took the earring out of the box. The metal was still polished, the amethyst still vibrant. He stared at it. The void in his chest grew.

"The shield has been purged of any detrimental—"

Solas stopped. Lavellan closed his fingers around the earring and subtly moved his hand away

from sight.

“What have you found?” asked Solas, something unknown in the tone of his voice as he regarded Lavellan’s new inventory. The raven cloak would be familiar to him. The figure they’d hunted together had worn it.

“There was a hidden chest,” said Lavellan, feigning calm. “Cole and I found these inside and a few schematics. I think they'd interest Dagna.”

“I... see.” He stared at Lavellan, on the edge of a revelation he couldn’t attain, and Lavellan gave him no further purchases. “Will you keep the cloak?”

“It’s warm.” He stood. “Ellana, is there room in your pack?”

She approached at his call, but she faltered at the sight of him. As did Cassandra.

Wordlessly, Ellana unslung her pack and offered it so he could place the schematics inside along with the fragments of the daggers. They may be broken but Dagna could still benefit from studying them. Maybe even replicate them.

He placed the earring back in its box and pocketed it. Nobody saw.

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough of this place,” he lied, forced cheer back into his voice. “I think it’s time to jump into a river and bathe. I saw a stream earlier.”

“I smell like the dead,” agreed Ellana, going with it.

Thank you, he said through his eyes. She tipped her head subtly in acknowledgement.

Solas stared at him as they walked back.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to Darkani for fucking guessing Lavellan's name on November 22, 2020. Yeah, I marked the date because I went ballistic. You didn't even have any fucking evidence!

One last prediction, not really related to anything, but it'll be funny if I'm right.

Ras' name - actual name, not title/s - is Lavellan. Like first name.

Not sure why I think this. Just kinda do lol

??? 'just kinda do'??? wtf I'm going to eat your socks

Go have your laugh, you were right, I CANNOT believe--

Translation

[1] (Didn't put a hover translation becoz I wanted to expand on it a bit more)

Lana: [verb] to give without condition

Venuralas: [noun] Deity

El'u: [noun] Secret

-elan: [suffix] attached to a verb to turn it into an agent noun. E.g. vira (to walk) --> virelan (one who walks)

Okay so, Elvish is a language of intentions. Lavellan's name can be taken any number of ways. Whether one who gives secrets without condition to their deity, a secret one who gives without condition, or one who does it secretly. All of them applies. [\[↑\]](#)

Dirthamen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

i'm sorry.

The raven cloak stayed dry even as they walked through the flooded areas.

They encountered a small group of Venatori near the entrance. A spellbinder and three warriors.

“*Get out,*” Lavellan said, and shot forward with his hook and chain, buried his daggers into the spellbinder’s eyes. They fired blindly, flailing and screaming. The fire spell caught on the raven cloak, but the fire fizzled, nulled.

Once they took care of the rest, Lavellan held up his cloak with a considering expression.

“Enchanted with magic resistance,” said Lavellan. The El’amelan had left nothing to chance. His heart warmed.

“Then continue wearing it,” said Solas, something indiscernible in his gaze and voice. “But do not use it as an excuse to be reckless. It is likely only resistant to weaker spells.”

Lavellan nodded. “Yes.” Solas’ brows raised slightly, clearly hadn’t expected him to agree or give in so quickly, and Lavellan huffed. “I did tell you I’d try to listen.”

Solas stared at him again and Lavellan refused to fidget under his scrutiny. He’d been too careless tonight. What was Solas thinking?

“Can we please get to the bath thing?” asked Ellana. Solas and Lavellan snapped out of it.

“Right,” said Lavellan, “Let’s go.”

There was indeed a stream nearby, and after confirming that it was safe, they took turns bathing.

Once it was Lavellan’s turn, he approached the stream and undressed, hung the cloak on a low branch of a nearby tree, and waded into the stream until the water stopped at his waist. It was cold. The moonlight was bright. Lavellan eyed the scattering of stars and just let himself breathe for a moment, let his brain settle with the unlocked information.

The Well of Sorrows was quieter than usual.

Lavellan worked on getting himself clean, grimacing as he pressed against the new bruises he’d acquired.

Once he was sure he’d washed away the dankness from the temple, he sighed and braced himself against one of the boulders.

After all the memories he’d uncovered... He felt unbalanced. The steady soil he’d been standing on had been disturbed and everything was shifting and he couldn’t plant his feet anywhere. All the while, the warm, terrible void gnawed at his bones and picked the meat off his ribs.

He hugged himself. The gnawing was a deeper ache. He didn’t know what could fill it, he didn’t

know if it could ever be filled again.

“Lavellan.”

He scrunched his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Shut up.”

“Lavellan.”

Lavellan allowed himself a burst of frustration and anger and hit the water.

He stared at his wavering reflection.

His shoulders fell. Everything in him fell. He was too tired for this tonight.

A rustle behind him, followed by the sound of wooden wolves.

“That eager to get the mushrooms off your feet?” Lavellan asked, but Solas didn’t respond.

He faced Solas. It was dark and the water came up to Lavellan’s waist, so his dignity was mostly preserved, but Solas still averted his gaze. Lavellan bit back a smile.

“You act as if you haven’t seen me half-naked before.”

“I am being polite.”

“Not so polite. I believe we had an agreement to take turns bathing.” Lavellan did smile this time, but it was tired.

“I was worried,” was all Solas said.

“Ah, yes, the water is evil. It’s going to eat me, Solas. Solas, help. Help!”

Solas looked at him again. “You’re using humour. It seems I was right to worry.”

He threw his hands up. “Can’t I just be a funny guy? I’m tired, and occasionally funny. That’s me. That’s the culmination of who I am. Call me a spirit of the Funnies.”

“Humour,” corrected Solas, smiling slightly. “And you’re still deflecting.”

Lavellan scowled and turned his back to Solas. “Since you’re here, you may as well get yourself washed.”

It was silent for a while, but then he heard the shifting of fabric. The sounds of rippling water soon followed as Solas entered the stream.

Lavellan leaned against a boulder, the press of it hard against his back as he crossed his arms and rested his head against it so he could discern the skies for any familiar constellations.

Solas washed himself and Lavellan smiled at his muttering.

“Problem with the mushrooms?” Lavellan asked.

“Stop it.”

Lavellan laughed.

After a while, the sloshing of the water eased. Solas rested on the boulder slightly opposite

Lavellan's, the silence between them comfortable. It eased the tumult of Lavellan's thoughts. A little. Solas was a stabilising force, ironically.

Maybe that was part of being Change. Seeking external forces that would ground him if he couldn't regulate himself.

Hell, maybe Ghilan'nain was right. Maybe he *was* a parasite.

"What did the Highest One tell you?" asked Solas, dispelling the quiet.

"Is that what you were worried about?"

"I thought it may be a good start. You have never been so angry when you'd faced demons before. Or brutal. You told it to be quiet. What did it tell you? Do not lie."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Lies of omission are still lies."

Lavellan fixed him with a solemn stare. "Is that so, Solas?"

He made no visible reaction besides the tensing of his shoulders.

"Pray tell me, what am I lying about?" Lavellan asked.

"I would not know. It is called omission for a reason." Solas finally met his stare. "What did he tell you?"

Lavellan stayed quiet, considered lying outright or deflecting again. He did neither.

"He called me an undeserving traitor."

"Undeserving of?" He betrayed none of his thoughts, his expression impassive.

"Not going to ask about the traitor part?"

"And risk your evasion of the subject?" teased Solas.

"How dare you accuse me of that? I've been nothing but truthful."

"Well now, *there* is an outright lie." His teasing tone faded. "What did you tell him?"

Lavellan shrugged. "I told him he should have stayed dead."

Solas frowned. The water and air were cool, bordering on cold. "I see."

"No, you don't."

"No," he admitted. "Will you let me?"

"Will you?"

Solas' frown smoothed. "You already see far too much."

A breeze whispered past. What game were they playing now? Lavellan wasn't sure how willing he was to hold onto the truth with an iron grip anymore, not when everything felt as if it were unravelling beneath him. He'd thought that he would go into this second life equipped with all he

needed. That he would be on top. That he would know how to navigate Solas.

Fool. This wasn't a do-over. This was a continuation. As if he'd cleared a preliminary hurdle *before* he could enter the actual game.

Lavellan hugged himself. "I think I'll retreat for the night. It's getting chilly and my fingers are pruning."

Solas watched him. "Will you tell me? When you're ready?"

Lavellan paused, feeling a droplet of water slide down the curve of his neck.

"I'm still waiting," he eventually answered and left it at that. He waded back to shore. Solas didn't call after him.

He dried and redressed, and left Solas be, the ends of his cloak brushing against his ankles as he walked. The earring's box was still in his inner pocket, pressing against his side.

Ellana was waiting for him at camp, sitting beside the small fire and looking close to collapsing from exhaustion. He ruffled her hair.

"Sleep," he said. "We've had a long day."

She frowned up at him. "I just... are you alright?"

He considered lying again, but he was too tired. "No."

Ellana stood and tugged on his arm. "Come on, let's go for a short walk. Clear our heads. You can tell me what you found on the way."

Lavellan hesitated, almost declined, but he tipped his head and Ellana smiled. They walked into the forest while he talked. She huddled close beside him and he draped the cloak over them.

She was quiet by the time they returned to camp. Cole was sitting with Vergala, but everyone else had gone to sleep.

"I wish I could help more," Ellana murmured.

"Just be here." He slung his arm around her shoulder and laid his head on top of hers. "You're alive. That's enough for me."

She stayed quiet, her demeanor softening at the answer, but she still had that dissatisfied scrunch to her brows.

A spark lit in her eyes.

"Wait," she said. "Wait. The Keeper—I remember she told me that once the First becomes the Keeper, the previous Keeper teaches them the origins of our clan, and that they receive the very first Keeper's journal. But this is kept within the clan. Never shared during Arlathvhens. That was the first Keeper's wish, apparently."

His eyes widened. "You think...?"

She grabbed his shoulders, lowered her voice so the others in the tent wouldn't wake. "There has to be a reason why the clan is named after you in there somewhere."

“But only the Keeper can have it. It sounds like it’s a tradition to keep it a secret too.”

“I can send a letter back and tell Keeper Deshanna it’s important. If we can get our hands on that book...”

Lavellan looked down, mind spinning.

“Hey,” said Ellana and squeezed his shoulders. He looked up. She smiled. “We’ll figure this out, alright? I’ll help you.”

“I did mean it, you know,” he said, smiling back in thanks. “Just you being alive is enough.”

She shrugged. “What can I say? Exceeding expectations is a talent of mine.”

His smile widened.

He dreamt of a grand temple. Vaulted ceilings boasted a turquoise veneer and sweet camphor from the incense was thick in the air as the devoted performed their dance of worship.

“Wait!”

He looked back over his shoulder. A man was reaching for him, chasing, left hand flaring with borrowed sunlight. A ghost called to stay.

He did not wait.

There was no time to wait.

So he moved, made sure that the ghost was following close behind because the ghost was not whole. And neither was he.

He led the ghost through the winding paths of the temple, his cloak of feathers trailing behind him, and waited by the altar chamber where six pedestals stood. The ghost slowed as he ascended the stairs to the altar, eyes wary.

Desiccated organs rested on the pedestals. Golden eyes, silver tongue, hand flaring green, ears with silver cuffs, heart wrapped in thorns, and the head — that eyeless, tongueless, earless head — with a stylised raven upon its face. The vallaslin ink bled gold. The face on the head slowly distorted into a frozen, ghoulish scream.

Disassembled to be reassembled.

He stared at the ghost who had gone pale at the sight before him.

Their gazes met.

He reached. The ghost stayed rooted in place and watched him advance with fear, but the fear melted, replaced by stark realisation. The ghost reached back. Their hands pressed together. Mirrors. The ghost had finally caught up to him.

Lavellan stared at the raven-cloaked figure, had finally caught him. The shadows covering the

figure's face was finally gone.

It was his face looking back at him.

The organs melted.

He awoke gasping, blinking up at the morning sky in disorientation, something hard against his back.

Lavellan bolted up, no longer in his tent or bedroll.

He was in the ritual chamber.

“The fuck?” he whispered to himself and slowly stood. The raven cloak was on his back, but he didn’t remember putting it on. The pedestals were empty, and the temple was back to its dilapidated, flooded state, a few streams of light from the sunrise slipping past the canopies. How did he get here? What was that dream?

He rubbed his eyes. The raven-cloaked figure had been wearing his face.

Or maybe not wearing.

Maybe the figure had finally found their face.

The Well of Sorrows whispered, pressing, requesting attention. It felt almost... respectful. Reserved. Usually it had no trouble blaring its message. Lavellan tuned into it.

[*Ise amahn.*](#) ^[1]

There was a presence behind him.

The Well of Sorrows quieted.

“Hello, Lavellan.”

Everything in him froze. He let out a shaky breath. No... it couldn’t be.

Lavellan turned.

His next breath rattled in his lungs.

Lavellan straightened his back and squared his shoulders as if that would impart him with strength.

“Hello, Dirthamen.”

Dirthamen smiled gently at him. A blade of sunlight fell in a strip across them, showering Lavellan yet stopping at Dirthamen, leaving him only half-cast in light.

“You’re not real,” Lavellan said, had wanted to sound certain and composed, but his voice came out as a trembling whisper instead.

“I’m real enough.” He took a step closer.

Lavellan took one back.

Dirthamen stopped.

“You’re not,” Lavellan said again. “You’re an echo, travelling long after the source of the noise is gone. You’re not here.” Something twisted in him. “You’re not here.” His voice came out choked. He’d meant for it to be a self-reaffirmation, but it twisted into an accusation.

He’d been fine without the memories of Dirthamen. He’d been *fine*.

And now all he had was the increasing awareness that some part of him had been lost. Possibly forever.

“Fuck you,” said Lavellan, scrunched his eyes shut and looked away because he couldn’t bear it. Couldn’t bear to see him standing *there*. Lavellan would choke on the cluster of emotions he’d been pushing away otherwise. “I was fine without you. I was *fine*.”

“Were you?” Dirthamen asked, soft.

His hands balled into fists. “You’re not him. Whatever you are, leave. You’re not him.”

“Do you wish I was?”

“Stop it.”

“That’s not a no.”

“Stop it. Stop talking. Stop it.”

He stopped talking. The silence stretched.

When it had dragged on for long enough, Lavellan opened his eyes tentatively, but Dirthamen was still there.

Lavellan fixed him with a bitter glare. “Why are you here?”

Dirthamen looked up at the sky, the sunlight falling over one eye. He squinted slightly.

“Because you were calling for me,” he said.

“I wasn’t.”

“Then why am I here?”

Lavellan made an irritated sound at the back of his throat. “Because this is your temple. Echoes of you linger here. The Fade must be building a dream off that.”

“Echoes of you linger here, too.” He tipped his head back down so he could meet Lavellan’s eyes again. Everything about him screamed of familiarity. “I’m here because you wanted me here.”

“I don’t.” But his voice sounded feeble. The void in his chest pressed at him.

Dirthamen took another step forward, then paused. Lavellan looked down but didn’t move back. Dirthamen moved closer, crossing the small distance between them, his dark robes billowing with each step, until he was in front of Lavellan.

Lavellan stared at the ornate designs of Dirthamen's robes instead of meeting his eyes.

"You can tell me to leave," said Dirthamen.

The word, "Leave," sat on Lavellan's tongue.

No, that was a lie. The word wasn't on his tongue at all. It was so far from it. It was languishing in the forgotten corners of his mind instead, yelling at him that telling Dirthamen to leave was wise.

Lavellan's silence was answer enough.

He finally met Dirthamen's eyes, taking in the familiarity of his face, and he caught himself reaching for him. He pulled his hand back.

Dirthamen's gaze softened. "You can. This isn't real."

"You're real enough," he said, repeating Dirthamen's earlier words, his hand hovering uncertainly between them. Lavellan pressed his fingers against Dirthamen's chest instead. He was solid. Lavellan's lips twisted. "Real enough." He clutched at him, the smooth fabric of Dirthamen's robes scrunching beneath his grip. "Real enough."

And his presence was an undeniable comfort, real or not.

Dirthamen slowly raised his hand, paused again, waiting for Lavellan's reaction. Lavellan said nothing, but he didn't move back.

He rested his hand against Lavellan's cheek, as he always did. Lavellan couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

"This isn't real," Dirthamen said again, gentle.

This wasn't real.

So he could give in, couldn't he? Just for a while. He could be weak.

Lavellan leaned into his touch. As he always did. Dirthamen's hand was warm against Lavellan's chilled cheek, and that warmth was spreading over the rest of him.

Lavellan's eyes closed, lips pulling into a small, contented smile without his meaning to. The void in him filled with smoke. It wasn't the real thing, but it was enough to emulate it and he could feel complete. If for a while.

"You're not really here," Lavellan whispered. His chest was thick with an intense array of emotions warring against one another, the force of their fighting threatening to break the walls of him, cause him to spill over.

"No."

"You're locked away in fuck knows where."

"Yes."

"But you're real."

"I thought you said I wasn't."

Lavellan opened his eyes, tried to meet Dirthamen's gaze, failed.

"You're not here but you're still real," Lavellan said. "No matter how much I wish you weren't."

"If you wished for me to not be real, I wouldn't be here." He brushed his thumb across Lavellan's cheek. "You cannot keep pushing me away."

"Watch me." That didn't sound as intimidating or challenging as it could have been. Likely because he wasn't doing much to back up his declaration.

"What good is that going to do?" asked Dirthamen. "Pushing me away?"

"It means I won't ache for something I can't have."

"My dear Lavellan," he murmured, placed his other hand at the back of Lavellan's head and slowly guided it to rest on Dirthamen's chest, his collarbone pressing against Lavellan's forehead, "you're already aching."

Lavellan took a shaky breath. He hated this. Hated how much he was seeking this. His hand was growing sore from his tight grip on Dirthamen's robe.

They both stood there, real and unreal.

"You have to be careful," said Dirthamen, his voice reverberating in his chest, and Lavellan relaxed further. "You're moving too fast, [ma el'ean](#)^[2]. Things will get more and more difficult to control."

"Everything feels like it's pushing me to move faster. I'm—" *Scared*. He bit his tongue.

Dirthamen carded his fingers through Lavellan's hair, comforting. Lavellan stopped himself from melting against him.

"You said you'd be here," Lavellan found himself saying, heat rising. "You said you'd undo whatever destruction I'd cause. That you'd stop me from destroying myself." He gritted his teeth, pressed himself further into Dirthamen as if he could disappear if he did it hard enough. "But all I've done so far is break and break and break and I'm the one putting myself back together."

Dirthamen didn't answer. He stopped combing through Lavellan's hair.

He tightened his grip around Dirthamen's robes even further. "I'm *tired* of picking myself up. I'm tired of thinking, I'm tired of working and worrying and planning. I'm *tired*. I want to stop, fuck—" The heat caught in his throat. He clung onto Dirthamen, pressing his face into his chest so he wouldn't feel his tears roll down his cheeks. "You were supposed to catch me."

"How can I catch you? You would not welcome it. I am no longer your god."

"I'm not asking you as my god!" he snapped and raised his head, eyelashes matted with tears, every blink feeling scratchy. Lavellan's body trembled from the effort it was taking to keep himself together.

Dirthamen's expression remained mostly unchanged, but his gaze softened. "Then as what?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but he couldn't find the word that could convey the proper depth. Not without an aura to accompany it. Words weren't enough. An emotion burned in his chest, dripping in thick strands from his ribs, but he couldn't put a name to it. He wished he could simply

reach in and grasp it, rip it out and offer that viscous, pulsing burn trickling through his fingers as answer.

Lavellan made a frustrated sound.

“The point stands,” said Dirthamen. “Friend, god, or...” He paused, shook his head. “Whatever I may be, you would not welcome my return.”

It was Lavellan’s turn to say nothing.

Dirthamen sighed, cupped Lavellan’s face once more. “I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

“Are you really him?” Lavellan asked, almost a whisper. “Or am I going mad? Am I just seeing and hearing what I want? I know it can’t be you, you’re gone.”

“You said I was an echo.”

Would an echo feel this warm?

“I suppose it doesn’t matter now,” repeated Lavellan with a wry smile.

Dirthamen smiled back. That smile Lavellan loved so much.

“Lavellan...” He wiped away some of the wetness beneath Lavellan’s eye. “It’s time to wake up now.”

Lavellan closed his eyes and held the hand Dirthamen had over his cheek, gripped it, felt the press of Dirthamen’s knuckles against his palm.

“You bastard,” said Lavellan voice breaking.

His eyes opened.

The canopies of the trees within the temple sanctuary greeted him, the sky the colour of a soft bruise. It was dawn. The stones bit into his back.

Lavellan sat up, found himself on the floor of the ritual chamber, raven cloak on his back.

But no Dirthamen.

Dark wings fluttered in his periphery and he turned, heart in his throat, irrationally hopeful. But it was only Vergala. She perched on a pedestal, tilting her head at him.

“I saw him,” said Lavellan, voice hoarse. “Or what I wanted to see.”

She opened her beak.

“Ir abelas,” she said, voice a clear copy of Dirthamen’s.

Lavellan stared.

Then hung his head, hand clutching at his chest, raw and aching and lost.

And that's it for the temple folks! See? Wasn't that a fantastic vacation?

Me cramming solavellan and dirthavellan in one chapter: ¿por qué no los dos?

Before you go, have some ART. Darkani drew the Change tarot card from the Fade, it is so pretty.

[HERE LOOK AT IT](#)

Translation

[1] **Ise amahn:** He is here [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ma el'ean:** My raven [\[↑\]](#)

Elegy for the lost

Chapter Notes

Not beta-read and only very lightly proofread by me because I am Tired™. If there are any dodgy bits, you did not see them. It does not exist. Reality is a sham. I am a con artist and you have been bamboozled by my wit and charm.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

longing and void—

Lavellan walked back to camp with Vergala perched on his shoulders. He stared at the sky. It was just past dawn. Cassandra would probably be awake by now. Maybe Solas. Definitely not Ellana.

He glanced back at the temple behind him, a cold hollowness having settled at the bottom of his chest. How had he ended up at the temple?

Vergala butted her head against his cheek, and he smiled, raising his arm so she could perch on it. He held her against him.

When they arrived at camp, Cassandra was already awake and pacing while Cole was sitting and drawing on the stones once more. She looked up at his arrival and her stance visibly relaxed.

“Inquisitor,” she said, a touch relieved.

“Good morning,” he said, wary, preparing for any questions.

“I was worried since Cole said you went out for an early walk, but you left your weapons behind. Please be careful. We do not know how safe the area truly is.”

“Ah.” His gaze flicked towards Cole. “Sorry to worry you. I just... wanted to clear my head, I suppose. We still have cured meat, right? We can have that for breakfast. Then we should head to Royeaux to meet up with Vicinius.”

She nodded. “I will check on the horses then.”

While Cassandra headed for the horses, Lavellan let Vergala go and perch on Cole’s shoulder. He stared at Cole.

“What happened?” Lavellan asked.

“You woke up,” said Cole. “No longer looking through a window. You opened the door.”

Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. “No, I meant— How did I get from here to the temple?”

“You were following yourself.”

“What, I got up?”

“Yes.”

Sleepwalking. Fantastic. “This better not become a regular occurrence. I sleep in the highest tower of Skyhold, Cole. You can imagine the kind of trouble I’d be in.”

“You won’t. You’re awake now.”

Lavellan rummaged through their supplies, chewing at his lip. *Was* he awake? He still felt as if he were locked in inertia. His mind might be clear, but he didn’t feel so defined any more, felt as unstable as a cloud of smoke.

“Was he really here, Cole?” Lavellan asked softly.

Cole paused his drawing and looked back at the temple, just visible past the trees. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, eyes glazing. “He had more to say, but that was all he could bring himself to say. I’m sorry. Whispered beneath his breath.” He looked at Vergala. “I’m sorry. And she heard. A message from a bleeding god.”

“Stop,” said Lavellan, a lump growing in his throat. “I just— I just want to know if he was real. Just tell me, Cole. Please. Was he there, was I talking to him? Some part of him left behind, I don’t know! Just—” He stopped, forced himself to take a deep, shuddering breath, and rubbed his face. “Was that him or was it just... wishful thinking?”

He stared at Lavellan, the glaze in his eyes vanishing. “It was real. To you.”

“That’s not— But was he *there*?” he asked, almost manic. “Just give me a straight answer, *please*.”

Cole looked at him sadly. “I don’t have one.”

Lavellan’s shoulders slumped. A soft, despondent scoff of laughter escaped him.

“Okay,” said Lavellan, almost a whisper. “Could you get water from the stream please?”

Cole watched him for a few more seconds, but Lavellan refused to make eye contact. Eventually, he stood and heeded the request.

Lavellan looked at the simple drawing Cole had done on the stone.

Two ravens.

They finished packing up their supplies and saddled the horses. Lavellan shot the temple another glance, hesitant to depart.

“The Veil is calmer,” said Solas as he stood beside him, looking at the temple as well. “Perhaps the spirits within the temple have finally been put to rest.”

But what about me? When do I get to rest?

“It’s probably peaceful just being a spirit,” Lavellan murmured. “Simplicity. You know what you embody.”

“Perhaps,” said Solas, something wistful in his tone. “I suppose it would depend on the kind of spirit you are. Some are more drawn to the world of Waking.”

“That must suck. It’s a shitshow over here.”

Solas laughed, gentle but deprecating. “Indeed.”

They slid on their horses and rode. Lavellan kept looking back until the temple was lost within the forest once more.

They made their pit stop at Val Royeaux to go meet with Vicinius, but Lavellan already knew that they’d be too late.

He didn’t bother pushing to meet up earlier. The man had it coming.

They hailed a carriage to the Dawn Quarter where the Inquisition-owned residence awaited. It was a small house, simple. As simple as Orlesians could get, anyway.

“Why is everything so bright?” Ellana griped. “And *marble*.”

“Welcome to Orlais,” said Lavellan.

A few hours after settling, an Inquisition scout arrived with a letter.

“Worship,” they said with a salute, and passed him the letter. “I am to inform you that Ambassador Montilyet has requested for you to wait for her arrival tomorrow before returning to Skyhold.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Do I need to send anything back?”

“No, Worship. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Stay safe.”

They saluted again and left.

Ellana squinted at him. “Is the Inquisition everywhere like this?”

“Pretty much,” said Lavellan.

“His presence is felt everywhere,” murmured Solas.

“The Inquisition,” he corrected.

“Under your leadership.”

Lavellan sighed and opened the letter, reading Josephine’s curling penmanship. He frowned.

“Is everything alright?” asked Cassandra.

“An assassination attempt has been made on Josephine’s life. She’s alright, but she wants to talk to me about it tomorrow.”

“Maker,” breathed Cassandra. “One thing after another.”

“Rest up. We still have that meeting with Vicinius tonight.”

During the afternoon, he and Ellana made an unspoken decision to visit the alienage, doing their best to stay out of sight. He'd foregone the raven cloak for a normal one since the raven cloak was too conspicuous, but he felt uncomfortably bare without it.

The earring box stayed in his pocket.

They scaled the alienage walls and watched from the parapets. The alienage was like the Halamshiral slums — cramped living spaces, poor conditions, but a strong sense of community.

“Creators,” whispered Ellana. “I saw the alienage in Wycome but... they're overcrowded in here. How many elves do you think live here?”

“From what some of the elves I've spoken to in the Inquisition have told me, easily over ten thousand.”

They returned home, their moods a cocktail of displeasure.

Solas looked up from his book. Ellana retreated into a bedroom while Lavellan put the raven cloak back on and collapsed on the couch across Solas. Lavellan lay back, one knee pulled up, the other dangling off the couch.

“The alienage,” Solas deduced. Lavellan made a noncommittal noise and Solas sighed. “Why do you do this to yourself?”

“It's a reminder,” Lavellan murmured, and draped his arm over his eyes.

He still had to watch over the People.

They arrived at Vicinius' place that evening. One of the outer walls had been damaged, the bricks littering the front lawn. Solas examined the ambient magic.

“The Venatori,” he said.

Cassandra tried the front door. Locked.

“Here, leave that to me,” said Lavellan and strode towards the door. “This requires a delicate touch.”

He picked up a brick and smashed it into the window beside the door.

His companions stared at the broken glass in stunned silence.

Lavellan reached in through the window and unlocked the door. Cole's expression brightened.

“Oh! That was fast,” praised Cole.

“You are so lovely, Cole,” said Lavellan as he opened the door. “Always appreciative of my contributions.”

Solas pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s too late to disown family members, isn’t it?” asked Ellana.

“Never too late,” said Cassandra.

Lavellan grinned as they stepped into the ruined house. The Venatori came running down from the commotion they’d caused and their moods soured significantly.

The bedroom upstairs with blood smeared on the walls and Vicinius’ unfortunate corpse in the middle soured their moods further.

He surveyed the carnage, the stench of acrid metal thick in his throat.

Something flashed in the corner of the room, small whimpers filling the space. He turned his head.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t— Please don’t kill me.”

Lavellan crouches in front of the teenager cowering in the corner of the room, but they won’t meet his gaze. He looks around him. It’s... quite the scene. The bedroom they’re in used to have white walls and pristine marble floors.

He eyes the explosion of blood on the walls and floors.

Used to.

“What happened?” Lavellan asks.

“I— I got frightened. Please, I didn’t mean to kill them.”

“You killed very prominent courtiers from Lord Elgar’nan’s court. A lot of people won’t be pleased. You’ll be put to death.”

They whimper.

A soft mew catches Lavellan’s attention. He frowns. “What was that?”

“Ah.” They uncurl slightly. A kitten pops its head out of the collar of their tunic. “We’re not supposed to keep pets, but I found her starving. I couldn’t just leave her alone. So I hid her with the other animals. I’m trying to nurse them all back to health. I... overheard that my masters found out and wanted to kill the pets I’ve been secretly keeping to teach me a lesson.”

Lavellan tilts his head. ‘Overheard’.

“So I tried to run,” they continue. “But my masters caught me. They were going to kill her in front of me and then the others. The animals didn’t do anything wrong, it’s not fair.” Their dark eyes flash, defiant behind the curtain of blonde hair, their arms wrapping protectively around the kitten. Their aura flares, jagged and piercing. “So don’t touch her.”

The air thickens with magic. Dangerous and potent.

Lavellan regards them more closely.

“You can’t run for long,” says Lavellan. “They’ll find you. Lord Elgar’nan will want

retribution.”

The magic in the air builds and they open their mouth—

“So how do you feel about faking your death?” asks Lavellan.

They stop, stare. “What?”

“Fake your death to avoid persecution. Pretend you killed yourself after killing your masters.”

They flinch at the final part of his statement, their own crime summarised so brazenly to their face.

“I could help you,” says Lavellan.

They shoot him a suspicious look. “Why would you help me?”

He smiles. “I’m trying to build an elite group of spies. I think you’re a good place to start.”

“What? No, you’re mad— I don’t— I don’t spy. I’m no good at sneaking or— or— being a spy! I’m bad at lying, I’m bad at acting. I’m bad at—” Their eyes fall on their masters’ almost indiscernible corpses. Their voice softens. “I don’t want to kill again.”

“You won’t have to. You’re a scryer, Bel’vedir.”

They tense.

“You never overheard,” says Lavellan. “You saw a vision, and you tried to run. But your masters couldn’t well lose their little scryer.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I like being thorough.”

“Who are you?” Bel’vedir asks, voice dropping into a whisper.

Lavellan changes his face in answer. Their eyes widen.

“The face changer. I’ve seen you,” they say. “You walk the shadows. A great and terrible raven. I saw you.”

Oh? “What else did you see?”

“Your large wings were torn, and you fell into the sky.”

Lavellan goes quiet, unsure of what to make of that.

Bel’vedir bows their head. The kitten rubs its face against their cheek.

“Wouldn’t her claws hurt?” asks Lavellan, filing the vision away.

“She’s cute, I don’t mind,” they murmur, and look up at him. “So you’ll help me in exchange for me joining you?”

Lavellan pauses. "I'll help you. You can join me if you wish. I will have to train you though, but I'll keep in mind your concerns. Having a scryer will help make our future jobs easier. You can also keep your pets."

They brighten at that.

"If you stay with me, I swear you will be safe from dangers not pertaining to your duties. I can teach you how to wear anonymity, to use the shadows as sword, shield, or cloak. I can teach you to harness your magic, make sure you don't lose control like this ever again."

Bel'vedir purses their lips. "I will have to think on it."

"Very well." He stands. "Shall we go fake your death?"

The affair is sorted, the case is dismissed as closed.

Lavellan sets up a small, hidden cabin where Bel'vedir retreats to with all their pets.

"In five days, come to me with your answer," says Lavellan and leaves them be.

Bel'vedir finds Lavellan five days later. He already knows their answer.

Lavellan offers his hand.

"Swear you will never give me orders to kill," says Bel'vedir.

"I swear."

They take his hand.

"Hanon, I found these," said Ellana. Lavellan blinked. The corner of the room was now empty, and the whimpers had faded.

Fondness warmed his chest.

Lavellan looked at Ellana. She held up the shards of a memory crystal.

"Good find," he said. "We'll take those to Dagna. Now, let's get out of here. I've had my fill of desiccated body parts for the year."

They left the house. The fondness in his chest twisted to longing, then emptiness.

"Your large wings were torn, and you fell into the sky."

"Right again, Vedir," Lavellan murmured to himself.

The next afternoon found him sitting beside Josephine on a balcony while waiting for Comte

Boisvert. Josephine stirred honey into her tea, looking off into the distance in worry. Lavellan drummed his fingers on the table and propped up his cheek on his fist.

Faint music in the distance caught his attention. He raised his head.

“That doesn’t sound Orlesian,” he mumbled.

Josephine looked up from stirring her tea. “I’m sorry?”

Lavellan paused. “Do you hear music?”

“Music?” She frowned and paused, straining to hear. “No, I don’t believe so.”

“Ah.” A memory again. What now? He settled back in his seat.

The music was so... lovely. A full, soothing, yet almost weeping sound. What instrument was that? He’d never heard it before, but it sounded so familiar. A violin? No, not quite, but something similar.

Lavellan closed his eyes.

Notes drifted. They were muffled and he couldn’t hear them clearly.

He follows the sound, curious.

The Evanuris’ palace isn’t a place he’s fond of. Everything is too large, too wide, too open. The only place he likes within it is Dirthamen’s wing, but still, Lavellan makes his way through the too-wide corridors in search of that melody’s source. What beautiful music. Who is making it?

He encounters a sky-blue spirit sitting on the ledge of an arched window. A spirit of Inspiration. The music is louder here, but Inspiration is not the source.

“Beautiful, is it not?” asks Inspiration, electric flashes of a more vibrant blue circulating within its form. “He rarely plays now, but he used to play all the time. I used to always listen.” It sighs contentedly as it looks out at the clouds.

“Who is it?” asks Lavellan.

Inspiration gestures at the corridor’s intersection. “Make a left and find out. But he hates it when he has an audience. Try not to get seen. I don’t want him to stop playing.”

Lavellan doesn’t want whoever he is to stop playing either.

He nods in thanks and turns the corner, the music now louder. He determines the instrument as the num’ean^[1]. The rich sound of its strings always holds that tinge of melancholy, plucking at something within the heart.

Lavellan finds a door by the left wall. It’s unlocked. He opens it slightly and peers into the room.

It’s a music room. Someone is seated with their back to him, the small num’ean resting on their thigh as they bow and release their melody. Lavellan’s eyes widen at the familiar spill of dark hair.

Dirthamen's deft fingers press at the strings with incredible precision, bowing with such feeling.

Lavellan has never known that he plays. Centuries of serving Dirthamen and he's never known? Or, wait, has Lavellan even bothered to ask?

The music is swaying, rich, a touch aggressive at points. Dirthamen plays a quick succession of notes and Lavellan gawks, feeling as if Dirthamen will slip at any moment, but he doesn't. Of course not. He's in control.

Dirthamen stops and places the bow down, reaches towards the small table and writes into a page. Lavellan gawks further.

He's composing?

Dirthamen puts the pen down. "Come in and close the door behind you."

Lavellan jumps, then sheepishly shuffles in and closes the door. "I apologise for eavesdropping."

"I am surprised. You do not frequent this part of the palace."

"I heard music and it— I thought it was lovely and I ended up following it."

Dirthamen pauses, then murmurs, "Thank you."

He places the num'ean on its stand, its five strings stark against the dark and polished wood. Most num'eans are adorned with crystals or have the carved grooves on its main body painted, but Dirthamen's is plain.

"Still," says Dirthamen, "how strange. I'm quite certain I've placed muffling wards in place. I must have forgotten."

"Why?" Lavellan asks. "Your music is beautiful. You should be playing in front of crowds so your music can be appreciated and adored."

He stands and faces Lavellan. "I do not make music to be adored," he says. "It's merely an outlet, I suppose. For my personal enjoyment. Occasionally, I play for my family."

"Oh," says Lavellan. "I understand. I'll take my leave immediately if you'd prefer to be alone."

Lavellan bows, already opening the door—

"Wait."

Lavellan stops, glances back at Dirthamen. He isn't looking at Lavellan, has his gaze fixed on the sheet music on the table instead.

"You may stay, if you'd like."

Lavellan can't stop himself from smiling. "I promise not to look if it makes you uncomfortable. I have some reports with me. I'll look over them instead."

Dirthamen says nothing, merely seats himself back down and picks up the num'ean.

Lavellan takes that as an acquiescence and moves to the couch beside the open window, the curtains fluttering in the summer breeze. He settles in and takes out the reports from the canister on his hip.

The melody starts again. Lavellan smiles as he reads, the breeze playfully threading through his hair.

At some point, he nods off, sunlight warm on his nape. Dirthamen's song curls in his chest.

Lavellan opened his eyes. The music was gone. The loss of it settled like a stone in his heart and he slumped in his seat.

'Comte Boisvert' finally arrived not too long after.

Upon revealing himself as a disguised assassin and standing to leave, Lavellan blocked his way.

"Might I pass, Inquisitor?" asked the assassin. "I did not come here to fight. Merely to talk."

One less of him was one less who could make an attempt on Josephine's life.

At least, that was what he told himself.

"No."

The assassin unsheathed their daggers from gods knew where and lunged at Lavellan without warning. He ducked.

"Jo, get back!" he warned.

More assassins from the House of Repose appeared as back-up, but Lavellan had killed would-be gods before.

They were all dead within a minute or two.

Josephine looked at him afterwards, disapproval and horror shining in her eyes. "Inquisitor, he gave us a chance to leave peacefully."

Lavellan watched the blood pooling on the marble floors, feeling mildly detached.

"Real Comte Boisvert's in that wardrobe in the corner," said Lavellan, nodding at said wardrobe. "And that's at least four less assassins who'd be after you."

She frowned at him. "Was this truly for me?"

Lavellan's gaze flicked sharply towards her. Her eyes widened and she averted her gaze, not looking at the bodies on the ground, holding herself tightly. He froze at the reaction.

"I am going to free Comte Boisvert," she said, clipped, and rushed to the wardrobe.

Lavellan looked at the sliver of his reflection from his daggers, blood smeared along its surface. His eyes were cold.

He looked at the assassin's corpses again and felt mildly sick.

After speaking to Leliana about the situation with Vicinius, the two of them headed to the Undercroft to consult with Dagna about the memory crystals.

Leliana eyed his raven cloak as they walked past his throne. “And here I thought I had a stake on the raven imagery.”

“You lost the moment I got a raven throne,” he teased.

“Varric is having the time of his life.”

Lavellan sighed and opened the door leading to the Undercroft. They descended the stairs. “Wonderful. What’s he come up with now?”

“Still the elven prince. He’s adamant.”

Dagna looked up from her workstation with a spark in her eyes. The reassembled memory crystal pulsed blue on her table.

“This is an amazing find!” she gushed. “It preserves a likeness, memories! The Venatori damaged it a little, but here—”

She tapped its surface and the crystal activated with smoke and light.

Teal wisps materialised in front of them, assuming the vague form of Corypheus and Calpernia. Lavellan frowned at the wisps of Calpernia’s face.

She was snarling.

“You are falling behind,” Corypheus said.

“You would entrust a task of such magnitude to a lyrium-addled rat from the sewers?” she asked.

“Samson’s preparations are progressing swiftly. What of you? What have you to show? A sabotage of his efforts? You overstep.”

Calpernia bowed her head but Lavellan could see the bitter twist of her lips from his angle.

“Apologies, Elder One. I still believe I am best suited to be the Vessel, and I hold Tevinter’s best interests at heart. If you would just—”

“Then prove it.”

The memory crystal sparked, and the visions faded. The teal wisps sputtered away.

“Sod it,” muttered Dagna and she shook her head. “Sorry, that’s as much as it can take. It wasn’t meant for this.”

Lavellan turned the scene over. That wasn’t what it had been last time. There had been no conflict between Samson and Calpernia.

“I smell dissent,” he mused.

Leliana held her hands behind her back and nodded. “We could exploit this.” She frowned. “Though I’m not certain what Vessel they were speaking of. Power? But Calpernia is already a magister. Corypheus must have some other plan.”

Dagna hummed. “I’m no Shaper, but I think I can get the crystal to remember new sounds!”

“And hide it in Calpernia’s belongings,” said Lavellan. “Or Samson’s to get his perspective on things. If there’s a rift within Corypheus’ forces, we want to worsen it. Although, Corypheus seems just fine worsening it himself by pitting them against each other.”

“He’s declared himself a god,” said Leliana with a wry smile. “You cannot expect the poor thing to make sound decisions.”

He laughed. “True enough. Alright Dagna, work your magic.”

“It might break,” warned Dagna.

“I know you can do it,” he said. “You’ve never let me down.” And she hadn’t. Ever.

He absentmindedly ran his fingers over his left forearm.

“We could track the Venatori who have been scouring the elven ruins,” said Leliana. “They’ll lead us to her. The matter of Samson’s location will be trickier.”

He chewed on his lip in thought. “Better the demon you know,” he mumbled. “We’ll stick with Calpernia.”

“At once,” said Leliana.

“Oh, and Leliana?” he asked. “Destroy the contract on Jo’s life.”

“You’ve convinced her?”

“Partly. I’m not going to sit and wait to gain favours, not while her life is in danger.”

“I will send one of my best,” she assured then paused, appraising him. There was a sharp glint in her eyes. “I heard about what happened with the House of Repose.”

He said nothing.

“What happened in the temple?” she asked.

“Reassembled the dried organs of a dead priest.” He shrugged, aiming for levity. “The usual.”

She didn’t buy it. “Are you getting lost in the shadows, Mahanon?”

The sound of the hammer hitting the anvil filled the sudden silence. Hiss of cooling metal.

There was a strange disconnect at hearing his name.

“No,” he lied. “It’s fine.”

Lavellan sat on his bed in the darkness of the room, staring at the earring in his hand. He placed it back into its box, tucked it away into the farthest corner of his bedside drawer, and closed it. He buried his head in his hands. His elbows dug into his thighs. The hollowness in his heart knocked and gnawed and knotted.

It wouldn't go away. He'd tried everything. He'd sparred, read, drank, laughed, buried himself in work. But nothing. They would distract him for a while, but the void would always return, always taunt him.

The bed dipped beside him. His head jolted up in alarm, but it was only Ellana.

"Oh," he murmured. "Hello. I didn't hear you come in."

"You weren't answering me," she said, brows furrowing.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just—" He looked down. "I don't know."

"Hey, are you alright?"

"I'm just stressed—"

She gave him a look.

He pursed his lips and bowed his head. Ellana squeezed a reassuring hand around his knee and waited as Lavellan sorted out his thoughts.

"It's like I'm being pulled in two directions," he said. "I don't know who I am anymore."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "You're my brother."

"Am I?"

She raised her head to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"The only way a spirit can pass through the Veil and stay for this long is if they possess something. Like what Compassion had done with Cole. Am I even Mahanon?" He glanced at her. "Or did Mahanon die and I just took on his memories and kept thinking I was him? Maybe I'm not the Mahanon you grew up with."

"That's not true."

"Why not?" he challenged. "It's possible, isn't it?"

"This isn't funny."

"I wasn't trying to be."

She shook her head. "Shut up."

"Maybe I'm not your brother. Someone else wearing your brother's dead body, wearing his face." He couldn't stop. "I do that right? Change faces?"

"Stop," she said.

"Why are you pushing it away? It's completely reasonable."

“Stop.” Her face pulled in that way it did when she was trying to hold back tears.

“At some point, your brother died, and you never even mourned him. You just kept on going with a stranger. Would you even be able to tell the difference?”

“Trying to be an asshole isn’t going to make you feel any more alive,” she snapped.

“I’m already dead,” he snapped back. “I’m supposed to be dead; *you’re* supposed to be dead. This entire fucking world is supposed to be dead.”

She flinched at the outburst.

Lavellan’s face immediately fell and coldness gripped him.

The quiet between them was just as cold.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t— I’m sorry.”

Ellana’s face twisted. She grabbed a pillow and hit him with it.

“That was mean,” she said, sounding firm, but her voice wavered at the end. Her grip tightened on the pillow. “Why are you torturing yourself with speculations when you don’t even know the truth?”

Lavellan didn’t answer.

Ellana dropped the pillow, grabbed him by the collar, and shook him. “You’re not any less deserving of acceptance if it does turn out like that. You can’t insist that spirits are people and then *not* extend that to yourself.”

“But—”

“So until we get to the bottom of this, don’t agonise over hypothetical scenarios. Now shut up and give me a hug.” She yanked him up by the arm and wrapped her arms around him. Lavellan hugged her back.

“Sorry,” he mumbled into her hair. “I don’t know why I said those things. I’m sorry. Don’t die, please. Don’t leave me.”

Her arms tightened around him even further. “I won’t leave you. Not anytime soon. So don’t start pushing away the people who care about you. Don’t let whatever void you’re feeling fool you into thinking you’re alone.”

Lavellan closed his eyes. “Maybe not alone, but it’s looking for something. I don’t think I can be rid of it, ever.” He’d opened a door that couldn’t be closed. No wonder Asunara had been apprehensive.

“Maybe,” she said, “but didn’t you say the Well of Sorrows had felt almost impossible to ignore in the beginning?”

“I guess...”

“And now it’s like background noise. I know optimistically you’d want it to be gone but... sometimes all you can do is live with it. Shitty though. Sorry, that was probably really unhelpful.”

“More helpful than me sitting in the dark and being a jackass.”

“There’s that.”

“The memories will probably only get worse.” He didn’t know what he’d do if he ever got all of them back. “They’re getting clearer, and they’re blurring into the present.”

“We’ll deal with them as they come. There’ll be bad days and good days, but we’ll be with you, good or bad day.” She paused. “And you know, it might help if you let more people know.”

He froze. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Please drop it.”

Ellana thankfully did.

Chapter End Notes

-Josephine Disapproves-

If advisor approval systems were a thing, you know Jo would have definitely disapproved of you killing the House of Repose assassins especially since you were given a diplomatic option.

Anyway, Lavellan is Not Coping.

Alternate chapter titles:

- local ambassador scared of her boss
- Dirthy is a musician no i don't take criticism
- scary face-changing man adopts yet another traumatised child who has committed murder but this one gets visions
- weather update: 92% chance of an identity crisis

Translation

[1] **Num'ean**: A five-stringed bowed instrument. (lit. weeping bird) [\[1\]](#)

See these familiar souls

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint! :D Reminder to eat/hydrate/walk/stretch/rest your eyes/sleep if you're able to <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

with messages from the past

Vivienne returned to Skyhold yesterday garbed in black, but attended to her duties as normal.

Lavellan ducked into the kitchen and prepared her favourite tea without thinking, already stirring honey into it by the time he realised what he was doing. He stared at it. She wouldn't have tried this tea yet, and she wasn't even big on tea, had only favoured it during the years after the Exalted Council.

Oh well, he already had it. He carried it with him to the Hall's upper balcony. Vivienne was resting on the chaise, looking over some papers, and he placed the tea on the table. Vivienne glanced at it, then at him.

"I thought you might like a break," he said.

She considered at the tea for a while and Lavellan resisted shifting uncomfortably. Her legs uncrossed and she placed the papers down. He relaxed.

"Won't you come sit with me, darling?" She reached for the cup and saucer and held it primly, still staring at it.

"Embrium, amrita vein, anise, and cardamom," he said as he sat on the chaise opposite her. "A spoon of honey. Steeped for a while so it's strong."

Vivienne sipped, paused. Lavellan waited.

She took another sip. He smiled.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"To my surprise, yes. I was apprehensive."

Lavellan chuckled. "I saw."

"It's a lovely brew."

"I thought you might like it."

They both looked out the balcony doors at the clear blue skies. Summer had arrived. It was still cold, but the air was a little less biting and frigid. Or maybe he just felt warmer from the scarf and raven cloak that he'd been wearing all the time. He'd gotten a few weird looks for wearing the cloak at first, but it soon became normal. The raven cloak had become associated with him. Again.

“How are you?” he asked.

Vivienne sipped. “I’ve stabilised the political disputes in Val Royeaux, and the Council of Heraldry will now be led by Bastien’s son, Laurent. You met him earlier, along with Bastien’s sister.”

He hummed. She’d been showing those two around earlier and had introduced them to Lavellan, sharing some small talk and condolences.

They’d ended that conversation with the Inquisition now having influence over the Council of Heraldry and the highest echelons of the Chantry. And by the Inquisition, he was aware that also included her.

All within one conversation. What a formidable woman.

“More Game-playing on your end,” he said.

“You and I are still playing, Inquisitor. The Game does not stop for grieving.”

“No, I suppose not.” He paused. “We can’t keep amassing power, you know?”

“Of course not. Were power the train of a gown, you would inevitably trip over it if it grows too long.” She sipped again. “But you mustn’t let that stop you from seizing what you can.”

“When do you know the limit?”

“If you do not know your limit, then you do not deserve power.”

Lavellan let out a surprised breath of laughter. She raised a brow.

“Some people call you unfeeling,” he said. “Already attempting political plays that take advantage of your lover’s death.”

Not even a shift in her disposition. “I simply do not see the point of wasting time.”

“It’s not that you’re unfeeling. I think this is just your way of coping, your own way of grieving. An attempt at normalcy.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, the movement so slight that most would have missed it.

“Of course, I could be terribly off the mark.” He shrugged. “I’m not claiming to know you.”

“I cannot tell,” she said, “if you’re mocking me.”

“My mocking is usually more direct. And I wouldn’t mock you, anyway.” Lavellan played with the ends of his Dalish scarf, tracing the patterns on it. “I may disagree with some of your methods, but I still respect you and value your contributions.”

She’d refused to bend and break in the past, refused to surrender to the demons and spirits taunting her in her dreams. Her death had been quiet in the waking world, but in the Fade, she had fought and fought and fought, dying in a brilliant glory. She’d never backed down, not even in the end.

The sight of her gaunt and worn in her bed turned his stomach, but when she looked at him, her eyes were bright and hard and filled with defiance.

Vivienne patted the spot beside her. Lavellan sat.

“You’re saying goodbye, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I will be leading a large number of mages in the Fade,” she said, “and we will damage the Dread Wolf’s numbers. Hopefully the war in the Fade will wear the demons’ numbers thin and give them less opportunities to harass the other mages in their dreams.”

“What if he comes himself?”

“Then I will dock his tail and send him scampering away.” She glanced at his arm. “Perhaps take one of his limbs.”

It wasn’t a realistic threat, but what mattered more was that she’d thought to make it.

His vision blurred with warmth. It stayed no matter how many times he blinked.

“Must you?” he asked. “I don’t—I can’t lose anyone else.”

“I must. And you must.” She placed her hand over his and gripped it. “You must be strong.”

“I know,” he said, voice cracking.

“You will lose and lose, so make sure you win back what you’ve lost by tenfold.”

Lavellan forced his expression to stay neutral, holding the tears back. Vivienne’s expression softened.

“I’ve quite missed your smile,” she said. “I am sorry that we have not given you much reason to do so.”

“Not exactly a joyful time.”

“You do not wait for a joyful time,” Lavellan said, her voice echoing in his head as he repeated her words. “You make it into one.”

Vivienne gave him an inquisitive look.

“Someone once said that to me,” he said.

“Who is this person?”

“She’s...” His gaze fell. “Gone now.”

“Farewell, Vivienne.”

Silence befell the room as she slipped into her dreams, never to return.

He realised he never got to thank her.

Lavellan rose. “In any case, I hope the tea is to your liking.”

“It was kind of you stop by.” Her voice softened slightly. “Thank you.”

Lavellan smiled at her. I’ve quite missed your smile.

“And thank you,” he returned, the words carrying the weight of the gratitude he’d never gotten to say. She’d never hear it, but this was close enough. “Have a good day, Vivienne.”

Her gaze followed him as he left.

“A missive from Hawke arrived earlier,” said Cullen during the War Council, terse as he handed the small letter to Lavellan.

Lavellan opened it.

They’ve turned the workers into living mines. Get over here. Now. Please.

The ‘please’ was squished at the edge of the paper, as if an afterthought.

“We’ll get ready to leave immediately,” said Lavellan, frowning. “What of Florianne?”

“Missing,” said Leliana. “However, we have retrieved the names of those in the Venatori without losing any of our agents.”

“Good. Do search for Florianne. It’s not a high priority, but just in case.”

They discussed a few more issues (he repressed a shudder at the news about the Executors), then adjourned the meeting.

Leaving Skyhold was almost a relief. All Lavellan had been doing there was dying under a mountain of paperwork or dying under a mountain of secrets that he was no closer to unravelling despite Cole’s gentle (yet still ominous) reassurances.

Emprise du Lion was near the foot of the Frostbacks, so they made good time and arrived by midday. The breeze was chilly on account of it being blown down from the Frostbacks, and the river had thawed from the warmer climate. If any snow still remained, they were but sad lumps of sludge strewn with dirt and grass.

But despite the cheery summer air and stray flowers, the town of Sahrnia’s atmosphere remained sullen.

Lavellan shivered at a sudden gust of cold air. “Fuck me, it’s cold.”

Bull chuckled. “Yeah, that’s one way to stay warm.”

“Your fortress is literally in the snow,” said Ellana.

“It’s not that windy at Skyhold,” Lavellan grumbled.

“Hey, yeah, what’s up with that?” asked Bull. “You’d think it would be, being up on the mountain and all.”

“Ancient elfy magic,” said Lavellan. “Whoever owned it first must have *really* loved comfort.”

“Or practicality,” quipped Solas.

Ellana snorted and disguised it as her clearing her throat.

They arrived at the forward camp, Hawke already waiting by the fire. She stood at their arrival.

“Inquisitor,” Hawke greeted, appraised him with an approving hum. “Hey, you don’t look half-dead this time.”

“A quarter?” he asked.

“Too generous. A third dead maybe.”

He shrugged. “I’ll take it. What’s the situation?”

Hawke’s teasing face grew grim. She updated him on the state of the Emprise: red lyrium mine, Suledin Keep, Red Templars everywhere. Lavellan once again split the group in half. One group to liberate the mines, and his group to fight the Red Templars and reclaim the Emprise. With their tasks assigned, they fanned out.

They soon encountered Michel de Chevin at the edge of Sahrnia and helped him fend off the demons. Strangely, the raven cloak didn’t impede Lavellan’s movements during combat. It moved and flowed with him.

Once the demons were defeated, Michel knocked his fist against his breastplate and bowed his head.

"I thank you," said Michel. "Your assistance was timely."

“Ser Michel de Chevin,” mused Lavellan. The Empress’ past Champion who’d been laid off for disobeying her orders during their little escapade at the Crossroads, and for lying about his half-elven heritage so that he could enter the chevalier’s academy, or so Briala had told him. Either way, Lavellan could sense the blood of the People within him, faint as it was. Another ability granted by the Well.

“Ah, you know of me,” he said, already grimacing. “I saw the Inquisition’s banners from afar, though you’ve certainly kept to yourselves for the past few months. Now that the Herald of Andraste himself has appeared, I assume the trouble has increased?”

Lavellan almost frowned at the title. “Unfortunately.”

“As I’d feared... Ah!” He bowed his head once more. “I have been meaning to thank you. I’ve heard of your efforts to save the empress’ life and restore stability to Orlais. No matter my mistakes, I still worry about her safety. Thank you, Your Worship.”

Lavellan pressed his lips and nodded, didn’t say, *Yeah, actually, she would have died had it not been for my spymaster.*

“What is your business here?” asked Lavellan.

“I hunt a demon who calls himself Imshael.”

Right. Imshael.

Solas’ head tilted in interest.

“Imshael, the Forbidden One?” asked Ellana. “*The Imshael? Here?*”

“Yes,” said Michel. “He’s holed himself up in Suledin Keep. The locals don’t go there, believe it to be the haunt of ancient elven spirits. The keep is guarded by the Red Templars. As you can see, there is only one of me and a wave of them.”

“We’ll do our best to get rid of most of them,” said Lavellan. “Once it’s safe, head to the keep and we can bring a backup of Inquisition forces.”

He saluted. “At once, Herald.”

Lavellan controlled his expression before it could twist into something sour. “If you please, I prefer Inquisitor.”

“Of course, Inquisitor.”

“Thank you. We’ll be back with news. Good, hopefully.”

Michel watched them go, frowning. Lavellan burrowed deeper into his cloak. Herald of Andraste was not a name he’d been called in a while.

So many names...

He was almost glad that they encountered another band of Red Templars since the fighting would at least take his mind off things.

Almost glad.

A Red Templar caught him in a deadlock, blades screeching. Shit. He had to get out this before—

A second Red Templar slammed their shield into his side.

Before *that*.

The bone amulet’s barrier triggered and deflected the Red Templar’s next strike. Lavellan pushed himself up, ribs throbbing.

Vergala swooped in and knocked the helm off the shielded Red Templar and harassed them, scratched at their face. The other Red Templar charged at Lavellan, sword raised high. Lavellan threw out his hook and chain. The chain wrapped around their legs. He pulled and they tripped.

Lavellan rushed in with his daggers.

Bull turned from his recently felled opponent and slammed his axe down on that fallen Templar. The metal of their armour crumpled. The Red Templar stopped moving.

“I had that one!” Lavellan complained, chain retracting back to its canister.

He grinned. “Too slow, Mercy.”

Vergala flew away from the shielded Red Templar she’d been annoying. Lavellan closed in on them instead and slit their now vulnerable neck.

Another Templar lunged for him. He leapt aside.

He slipped on the blood and melted snow over the stones and landed on his ass.

Ah shit.

The Red Templar bore down upon him.

A blur approached in Lavellan's periphery before Solas appeared in front of him in a gust of wind and magic.

He had no time to cast—!

Solas knocked the sword aside with his staff and moved right into a punch. He caught the Templar across the jaw. The Red Templar staggered back. Solas smashed his staff against the side of their head and set them alight. They collapsed, already unconscious before they even hit the ground.

That was the last of them.

Solas glanced back at Lavellan, panting. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"You punched a man for me," said Lavellan, awed.

"I have *incinerated* men for you, and you are more impressed with a punch?"

"They had hardened lyrium on their face! They were holding a *sword*!" Lavellan pushed himself up and grabbed Solas' hand. "Here, let me see that."

"It is fine," muttered Solas. It was not. His knuckles were cut, and rivulets of blood were streaming down his swiftly bruising skin. "I can heal it."

Lavellan took out a clean cloth from one of his pouches and dabbed at it. "You've exhausted your mana. I'm not waiting for it to get infected before you can heal it. Come on." He tugged Solas towards a rock and made him sit, tending to the wounds.

"They're still like this, huh?" Hawke whispered not-so-subtly to Varric.

Varric shrugged. "Pretty much."

Lavellan cleaned off the blood, inspected the wound and made sure no lyrium fragments had gotten into them, then dug into Solas' pack for bandages.

"You didn't tuck your thumb, right?" Lavellan asked.

"I know how to throw a punch, lethallin."

"That you do," he said. "Although, please refrain. You're no pugilist."

"Perhaps I will take up the profession if ever my current does not work out."

Lavellan laughed at the mental image. "May as well since Orlesian bard isn't a good alternative."

Once he'd wrapped Solas' knuckles and nagged him into drinking a healing potion, they continued. The task of retaking the camps and turning them into Inquisition bases proved arduous, but they pushed on.

By sundown, the Inquisition's banners had replaced the Red Templars'.

Cassandra's group eventually returned, as weary and haggard as them.

They were about to rest for the day when Ser Michel rushed into the camp, his harried gaze searching frantically. His gaze fell on Lavellan.

“Inquisitor!” he called out and Lavellan met him halfway. Michel leaned on his knees as he caught his breath. “I came to warn you as soon as I could. Imshael knows you are here. He has sent a wave of demons towards the village and they are left defenceless. Please deal with Imshael. I must go to Sahrnia.”

Lavellan frowned, feeling the fatigue in his muscles. They’d all been worn down today. The Red Templars had been tireless and unrelenting.

But they had no other choice.

“Imshael is your mark,” said Lavellan. “Are you sure?”

Michel shook his head vehemently. “I will not leave people in danger for my own self-serving ends.” The *‘not anymore’* hung in the air unsaid.

Lavellan regarded him, swallowing back any remarks about Michel’s past status as a chevalier and all its implications. He nodded instead. “Go. Quick.”

“Maker watch over you, Inquisitor.” Michel turned and Lavellan hurried back to where his companions were resting.

“Change of plans,” he told them. They looked up at him in varying states of weary. “I’m sorry, I know you’re all tired, but the demon in the keep knows we’re here. He’ll keep sending out waves of demons at Sahrnia if we tarry. We have to storm the keep.”

The camp became a bustle of activity as Lavellan directed the Inquisition soldiers and readied them to march.

“How’s everyone?” asked Lavellan.

Bull rolled his shoulders. “Let’s go kick demon ass.”

“What he said,” agreed Hawke.

The Inquisition forces headed for Suledin Keep and battered its doors down, fighting through the throng of Red Templars within.

But Lavellan had forgotten a crucial detail.

The red lyrium giants.

“Fuck, Sera, move!” Lavellan tackled her out of the flung boulder. She swore as they tumbled. “Vergala,” Lavellan yelled, pushing himself up. “Get reinforcements!” Vergala cawed from above.

“Shit, shit, shit!” said Sera, firing arrow after arrow to no avail. “My arrows don’t do squat!”

“Antivan fire!” he said. She grabbed the bottle from her hip and lobbed it at the giant.

The bottle broke and the fire burned, but it couldn’t lick through the waxy surface of its skin.

“Fell it!” shouted Cassandra.

More Red Templars arrived and swarmed them.

“We must eliminate the Red Templars!” said Solas, casting spell after spell. “They control the giants.”

“And when not under their control, the beast will rampage,” snapped Vivienne, slashed at a nearby Templar with her spirit blade.

“It’s not as if we have much choice!” said Dorian.

Lavellan smashed a flask of ice against his armour. He zipped through the Red Templars and froze them for his companions.

Everything blurred. There was no time to think. All he could do was move, move, move. But the air was souring. The Inquisition forces were growing fatigued.

Lavellan took a deep breath, felt the burn in his muscles, the air in his lungs, and let out a roar.

Boost morale. Inspire. That was all he could do for now.

The others soon joined him. Bull blew on his war horn, joining the crescendo of cries. It stirred his forces, gave them a fresh burst of adrenaline.

And with blessed timing, their roars were soon joined by the Inquisition's reinforcements. They swarmed onto the battlefield, ripped into the Red Templars and allowed Lavellan’s team to focus on the giant.

The melee fighters hacked at the giant's ankles, the mages defending them as the archers provided cover fire.

With a yell, Bull drove his axe deep into its ankles. The giant roared and staggered, toppled, spilling blood all over the stones. It tried to rise.

Hawke and Ellana piled two magic circles atop it and the air shimmered as the force of their magic pinned it down.

“Move!” Solas ordered, coated in orange wisps. Everyone backed away as Solas summoned a rain of stone and fire upon the giant. The smell of burned flesh filled the air, but the red lyrium added an artificial tang to the already pungent odour. Lavellan covered his nose with the cloak, eyes watering.

Once Solas’ magic settled and the dust cleared, the giant stayed unmoving.

Lavellan panted, sweat over his eyelids, blood in his mouth. He spat it out and wiped his lip with the back of his hand.

His companions staggered. Bull collapsed into a sitting position against the wall and leaned his head back. Vivienne perched herself gingerly on a fallen slab of wall, head against her staff as she caught her breath. Lavellan examined Sera and made sure she wasn’t concussed.

The fight wasn’t over, but they did all they could to recover their strength, passing healing and lyrium potions around. Some of the mages sat in meditative silence to recover their mana.

Once they’d regained their bearings, Lavellan retied his hair, tightened Revasha’s charm around his wrist, picked up his daggers, and turned to the others.

“Ready?” he asked them.

They pushed themselves up.

And they headed into the heart of Suledin Keep.

Imshael, the Forbidden One. He could shift into the forms of different demons, and although they’d ‘defeated’ him, they hadn’t been able to kill him. Obviously not. But the true danger lay within the choices he would offer. Imshael could dig into your head, rearrange it while he was there, and pull out the rawest parts of yourself.

They entered the keep’s main chamber, which had been laid bare for the sky, the stones having been eroded by the centuries. Imshael was already waiting for them with an amiable smile as though he were an envoy expecting foreign visitors. Red Templars and Behemoths stood guard by the wall. The sunset shrouded them all in a vicious, orange light.

“Imshael,” Lavellan greeted, kept his fatigue out of his voice.

Imshael tilted his head, eyes narrowing at him, before they widened and he gasped in delight. He opened his arms wide as if expecting a hug.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” laughed Imshael. “Long time no see, Isha’bel!”

Lavellan’s blood drained from his face.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh spaghettio.

I haven’t been able to explore Vivienne as much because again, I have to cherry-pick between the companions because there’s just too damn many of them, but I try to at least give them a spotlight. Madamel de Fer has definitely made her impact on Lavellan too.

Choices of our battles

Chapter Notes

I just want to briefly clear up some confusions last chapter because I forgot to put a translation waha. When Imshael called Lavellan Isha'bel, it was simply a shortened form of Isha'belsal'in.

(Fun fact: Shortening it to Isha'bel is actually grammatically dodgy in Elvish so Imshael is purposefully being annoying haha. The proper way to shorten it would be Belsal'in which still keeps the meaning of Many Faces.)

And another confusion was the Forgotten vs Forbidden Ones, and I share your pain. Those two are confusing why do they both start with F and end with 'en'?

Forgotten = the 'evil' elven gods dwelling in the Void. Don't know much about them, not encountered in canon

Forbidden = 4 elves (presumably) who shed their corporeal form and abandoned the People during an unknown calamity so they were exiled by the Evanuris and are now considered demons. Encountered throughout the DA games/novels.

Anyway, let's goooo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

desire and decisions

“So this is what you’ve been up to,” said Imshael. “Inquisitor, huh? I see you’re still making a job out of being a thorn in people’s backsides. Heard about what happened to you, though. Terrible business, that. But hey, you’re still here!” He made a face. “Oh, but you don’t look too good. You’re—” he gestured vaguely at Lavellan— “a little worse for wear.”

“Inquisitor, you know this demon?” asked Hawke, tense.

Imshael pointedly cleared his throat. “Choice. Spirit,” he insisted.

“I’ve never met him before,” said Lavellan, schooling his expression despite his racing heart. He wracked his memories for *anything* regarding Imshael, but all he heard was the faint echo of a cackle.

How did Imshael recognise him? The raven cloak? Or maybe he sensed Lavellan’s embodied ideal since most denizens of the Fade now seemed to be able to.

Imshael feigned a hurt look and cradled his hand to his chest. “Oh, you just keep hurting my feelings. Just like that time when you made me think we were *friends* and then tried to kill me! Oh, I was so *angry*, I almost wrung your little neck.” Imshael clawed his fingers and shook them, as though strangling somebody.

Lavellan stared at him blankly.

He sighed and raised his arms up in defeat. “But I didn’t since you were friends with such scary people. I wasn’t keen on crossing Dir—”

Ellana shot a streak of lightning at Imshael, the crackle of it drowning out the end of that sentence. Imshael yelped and leapt aside. Lavellan almost collapsed in relief. Creators, he was going to get a heart attack at this rate.

Everyone positioned themselves, ready for combat, but Imshael raised both his hands up in a placating gesture.

“Wait, wait, *wait*. See what I mean about scary friends? Terribly rude, too.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I don’t know you,” Lavellan said and raised his daggers. “But I *am* here to kill you. As dead as I can make you anyway.”

“Again? Unoriginal. Is stabbing friends a hobby of yours?” Imshael asked.

Cassandra cried as the blighted blade burned her from the inside—

“Want to test it?” Lavellan asked darkly.

He waved a hand in disgust. “You know me; I dislike fighting. So ghastly. Why don’t we sit and have a chat?” Imshael glanced at Solas, but he said nothing. Lavellan bit his inner cheek in frustration. So Solas got a pass but Lavellan didn’t?

“Why are Desire demons always so irritating?” Hawke grumbled.

“Desire demon, peh,” scoffed Imshael. “Everyone has desires. Not everybody acts on them. Not everybody makes their *choice*.” He grinned. Too wide. Too much teeth. “What of you, Bel? Will you make your choice? I can see you and your friends look a mite tired. Did the giant give you trouble?”

“Your handiwork, I take it?” Lavellan asked.

“It was a fascinating use of my time. Things were getting boring lately, you see?”

“Right, I’m killing him,” said Hawke, raising her staff.

“Ah ah,” warned Imshael and flicked his wrist. The Red Templar Behemoths turned and faced them in unison. Lavellan eyed the numbers. Too many. “Let’s all take a deep breath, shall we? Bel, I’ll offer a choice, for old times’ sake.”

“I don’t know who that is,” said Lavellan. “And I stand by what I said that I don’t know you.”

Imshael smiled, eyes squinting. “If you let me go, I can give you whatever your heart desires. I will even kill all of the Red Templars in this keep for you as a show of good faith.” He glanced at Lavellan’s bruised, worn, and weary group. “Unless you’d prefer to let them walk out of here with their organs in a tangle. If they walk out at all.”

Cassandra made an enraged and threatening sound and stepped forward. The rest of the soldiers followed, tense and ready to fight, but Lavellan held a hand up, eyes intent on Imshael.

“You cannot possibly be entertaining his demands?” asked Cassandra.

“Hanon, never let Desire demons run their mouth,” warned Ellana. “He’s yapped enough.”

“Wait,” said Lavellan. Imshael was right. Everyone was in no condition to fight in another prolonged melee, especially against such tireless enemies. These Red Templars differed from the ones they’d fought in Therinfal and the Emerald Graves. Everything here fought harder.

“What would you like?” asked Imshael. “Power? Riches? Virgins?”

“Virgins, are you serious?” asked Lavellan.

“There’s a surprisingly high market for it, you know?” He sighed. “But I never have any virgins. Maybe I shouldn’t have offered it.”

Could he trick Imshael somehow? Pretend to comply but then turn his blade at the last minute—

“I can *hear* you thinking,” Imshael complained. “Always thinking. Look, it’s quite simple. The choice is this: let your friends die, or all of you get to leave relatively unscathed with the bonus of crippling a large portion of Corypheus’ forces! Simple.”

“Inquisitor, we can still fight,” said Cassandra.

“I know,” he said.

Imshael quieted, dark eyes gleaming like the sheen of light on a beetle’s carapace. He appraised Lavellan. “You really do look so broken. Did he tire of you? Or are you lost and wandering now that he’s gone?”

Lavellan fought against the sudden roaring of his blood in his ears and held himself back from charging at Imshael.

“Is that supposed to make sense to me?” asked Lavellan, managing to maintain the unmoved charade. Just barely.

“Stop talking to it!” hissed Sera.

Fuck it, fighting it was. He tightened his grip on his daggers and was about to give the clear—

“I got it!” exclaimed Imshael, eyes sparking in revelation. “Your heart’s desire, I see it better now. Well, dear Bel, what if I told you I could recover what you’re looking for?”

He froze.

Imshael grinned at finally having found a purchase.

“Save yourself the tedium,” Imshael said, meandering towards him. “All that running around must be so exhausting.”

Lavellan pointed his dagger at him to discourage him, but Imshael just kept walking until the tip of the blade rested against his chest.

“I’ve listened to you talk long enough,” said Lavellan.

“Will you really risk losing the chance to get all your answers?” Imshael asked. “And I do mean all. I can do it. Wish it, and it’s yours. You’ve never liked power, riches even less. Silly of me to have offered them in the first place. Dreadful. I should have catered to my dear customers.” He spread out his arms as if he were a merchant displaying his wares. “Information. *Knowledge*. Do I speak your currency now?”

The coil of temptation curled against Lavellan's cheek. His hand faltered and the dagger lowered slightly.

"Hanon," Ellana said again, more urgent now. Imshael's gaze flicked towards them.

"They are so noisy, aren't they? Why don't we speak somewhere quieter?"

Before anybody could react, Imshael summoned a thick cloud of dark fog into the area. The others' distressed shouts muffled, dulled, faded, until it was just him and Imshael surrounded by a dome of dark fog. Despite its darkness, it emitted an eerie, purple glow.

Imshael tilted his head. "Are you finished pretending?"

It could be a trick. The others could still be watching while Lavellan thought themselves hidden away.

"Oh for—" Imshael sighed. "It really is just us. Honestly, always so paranoid. I've no interest in revealing you, or the Dread Wolf for that matter."

Lavellan scowled, pressed the dagger deeper into Imshael's chest. "Why?"

"Why?" he asked and blinked, unfazed by the dagger. "It's funny."

"Funny."

"Dear Bel, I am a simple creature. I offer choices, then I delight in the chosen options." He held out both hands, palm-up, and grinned. Too wide for his face and mouth. His beady eyes squinted further, glinted. "So what have you been up to before this whole Inquisitor gig?"

Lavellan stared at him. "You didn't seriously go through all this trouble just to make small talk, did you?"

"Come now, I haven't seen or heard from you in a long time. Entertain it a while?"

"No. How did you recognise me?"

"Rather hard to miss spirits of Change when they're walking the land."

But Imshael hadn't said anything the first time Lavellan had met him at Suledin. Asunara *did* mention something about the Veil's collapse. Could that be it?

"And honestly," Imshael continued, "only one spirit of Change would be insane enough to want a body. You all tend to hate this realm."

"Thought it may have been the cloak that gave me away."

"Too unreliable. You're quite the irritant, letting one of your little lackeys wear it occasionally to throw people off your trail." He paused. "You *do* remember your little lackeys, right?"

Lavellan didn't answer that. "Where have you taken me?"

Imshael smiled. "I'll take that as a no. Don't you worry, we haven't moved. In fact, your friends are trying *very* hard to break through the fog."

The dark fog shuddered, flashed with lightning. Imshael laughed.

“They don’t know, do they? Who you really are? Imagine the looks on their faces if they find out. Imagine what the Dread Wolf would do.” He stroked his chin in thought. Lavellan’s grip around the dagger tightened. “You didn’t exactly part on good terms, last I heard. There was also something about betrayal in there. Not sure. Wasn’t paying that much attention.”

Lavellan’s heart stopped.

Imshael’s smile widened with sinister glee. Bastard was trying to make Lavellan curious.

Damn him. It was working.

“Do I finally have your full attention?” Imshael asked.

“You really think I’d believe you’re telling the truth?”

“Truth? You want to talk about truth? Alright.” He grabbed the dagger pointed at his chest by the blade. “The truth is simple, Bel. You’re nothing but a grounded raven. Your wings are all torn up and here you are, trying to make castles out of the fallen twigs on the forest floor.”

A manic light sparked in Imshael’s eyes and he gripped the dagger, blood trickling as it cut his hand. He grinned.

“But I can give you your wings back! I can help you remember everything you’ve lost. You can *fly again*.”

Lavellan hesitated.

“Aren’t you tired of being uncertain? Of being kept in the dark about your own self? Don’t you want to know what happened?”

“And how exactly are you going to give back my memories?” Lavellan tried pulling his dagger away but Imshael had a solid grip on it. He didn’t let go even as the blade cut deeper into his palm.

“All your memories are huddling in some corner of your mind like scared little ducklings. Some come out when something catches their attention, and that’s when you remember. I’ll just give them a little... nudge. Get them out of their corner.”

“I don’t trust you sticking your fingers in my head.”

Imshael quieted, considering him. He let go of the dagger but Lavellan didn’t relax.

“I’m just offering you choices,” said Imshael. “Here’s how it is, Bel: you let me go and I help you remember everything. I’ll also kill the Red Templars in the keep, as I promised earlier. *Or* we fight, your friends get themselves killed, and everyone has a terrible time.”

Imshael slung his arm around Lavellan. He had no body heat, only emanating a hollow coldness. Lavellan’s skin crawled and he slapped Imshael’s arm off, backing away with his daggers raised as a warning.

“Good deal, no?” asked Imshael, undeterred. “And sand’s running, Bel. I’ve mobilised the Red Templars since they’re getting so antsy.”

He *what*—?

Imshael gave a lazy wave of his hand and the fog turned clear, showed his companions locked in a skirmish with the Behemoths. Bull took a hit for Dorian and fell to his knees. Cassandra had fallen,

her unconscious body being defended by Solas and Varric. Inquisition soldiers were dying in droves.

Chaos everywhere.

Lavellan looked around him, overwhelmed from the sounds of dying cries and clashing metal and constant movement. His thoughts reeled.

A Behemoth grabbed Ellana and flung her against the hard wall. She crumpled to the ground, unmoving. Blood pooled beneath her.

Bile rose in his throat.

No, no, no. He'd just gotten her back, he'd just saved her life, he couldn't lose her. Not again. He couldn't lose his family *again*.

Lavellan moved towards her.

Imshael darkened the fog and Lavellan ran into it as if it were a solid wall. Lavellan staggered back, panic clawing up his throat. The sounds of fighting faded once more.

He needed to get out of here. Ellana could be— And the others—

"I truly don't understand the hesitation," said Imshael. "This is the kindest choice I've ever presented."

This wasn't a choice — he had Lavellan's arm twisted behind his back. He shouldn't have let Imshael talk so much, shouldn't have let him have the time to see so much.

"I have to say," Imshael said—

"Creators, you don't shut up, do you?" Lavellan snapped.

"You're more expressive now," he continued, unfazed. "Oops, that's right! You have no memories of the decades' worth of lessons on how to have a stick up your ass. I quite prefer this, honestly."

The sounds of fighting filtered in through the fog. Bastard was doing this on purpose. Lavellan couldn't think past the panicked yells and clashing metal and the Well's whispers and Imshael's background chatter filling his ears.

"*Hanon*," came Ellana's distraught cry and his chest clenched as ice flooded his lungs. "Help, Hanon! [*Ha'ma'lin!*](#)^[1]"

His heart leapt to his throat. She needed him—

"Cute," said Imshael. "You have a sister now. What's that like?"

Images of her unconscious form flashed through Lavellan's head and his grip tightened on his daggers.

He should accept it. Imshael would call off the attack and everyone would be safe, and all his questions would be answered. No more chasing scraps of his memories and painstakingly reassembling himself until he lost sight of where he ended and began. A promise of certainty.

Ellana's cry came again. "Han—"

Imshael silenced the area and cut it off, leaving them in the choking quiet.

He had to take the deal. He couldn't risk it. Ellana was already injured—

Wait.

Didn't she get thrown against the wall? She was unconscious and bleeding. Nobody was getting up from that so soon, never mind being able to muster enough energy to shout over the fighting.

So which was true? Were the visions of the fighting false? Or were Ellana's cries false?

How certain could Lavellan be that whatever memories Imshael would help him recover would be true? That they wouldn't have been tampered with?

But Lavellan couldn't be sure until he escaped this fog.

He had to make his choice.

"Alright," Lavellan said, resigned. "Fine. I've made my choice."

Imshael grinned. "Go on."

Lavellan walked and stopped in front of him. He met Imshael's amused stare.

"Imshael, I choose—"

Lavellan surged forward, daggers flashing.

He buried one in Imshael's neck and another in his stomach.

"—to decline," Lavellan finished and twisted the daggers, yanked them out. Imshael stumbled back and pressed his hands against his injuries.

"So be it," Imshael gurgled, and the fog collapsed.

Everyone *was* locked in combat, and the Behemoths and Red Templars were stomping around the place, but the situation wasn't as dire as Imshael had made it out to be.

A relieved chorus of yells followed Lavellan's reappearance.

Imshael roared, the wet gurgle morphing into a teeth-grinding shriek. His skin emaciated, stretching over bone as sharp, arachnoid limbs burst from his back. He morphed into a Fear demon.

Lavellan flicked the blood off his daggers and charged at Imshael.

Someone grabbed him by the back of his cloak and yanked him back. Ellana cast her hand out and flung Imshael back with a blast of magic.

She turned and fixed Lavellan an incredulous look. "Have you lost your mind? You can't go up against him *alone*," she scolded but all he could feel was a dizzying wave of relief. She was fine. She was alive.

"Did you call me ha'ma'lin?" he asked.

"I haven't called you that since I was ten. Wait, how is this relevant?"

Lavellan slumped in relief. "Never mind."

Imshael recovered from Ellana's spell and cackled, rushed at them.

"Isha'bel," he taunted, "Come face your choice!"

Creators, keep announcing it to the world, why don't you?

He shoved Ellana out of the way. Imshael struck with his many limbs and Lavellan dodged the frenzied hits or deflected them with his daggers.

One limb smacked him in the stomach. Lavellan doubled over, the hit jarring his already sore ribs. The bone amulet barrier activated and deflected the next strikes.

"Lana!" yelled Lavellan, trying to back up.

Three magic circles caged Imshael and the air shimmered. The force of her magic forced Imshael to his knees and pinned him down.

Lavellan fumbled in his pouch and lobbed a grenade of Antivan fire at Imshael. The bottle shattered, set him alight. Imshael shrieked.

That should buy them some time.

Lavellan quickly scanned the battlefield. Commander Rylen was leading the soldiers so Lavellan trusted that they would be fine.

"Vivienne, Varric, Blackwall," Lavellan called. "Help me with Imshael!"

Those three went to his side. Imshael covered his face and shifted into a Rage demon, absorbing the Antivan fire.

"I am pleased to see you did not listen to the demon," said Vivienne, staff in one hand and spirit blade in another.

He smiled. "Did you doubt?"

"Of course. We are only mortal. No one is above temptation."

"I can't hold him there any longer," cried Ellana.

"Varric, I need you to keep tripping him up," said Lavellan. "Mines, traps, anything. Funnel him towards me, Vivienne, and Blackwall."

"Got it."

"Ellana, conserve your mana for your highest-damaging spells. We need to keep up a barrage. Never give him a chance to recover."

Imshael broke free. Ellana and Varric retreated to a safer area.

The strategy worked well enough. Varric manipulated the field, Ellana focused on bursts of high-damaging spells, Blackwall took the damage, and Vivienne sustained her defence as she attacked. They fell into a rhythm.

Imshael morphed into a Pride demon and shot a blast of lightning at them. Vivienne raised a barrier.

The barrier nulled the lightning and shattered. The shards hardened into ice and some managed to pierce into Imshael's carapace.

“Here’s a choice, Imshael,” Lavellan yelled and rushed in, attacking the damaged parts of the carapace. “Just go the fuck back to the Void.”

He laughed, rumbling and mocking. “What was it you said? *I choose to decline?*” He lashed his whip of lightning. Lavellan dove out of the way.

They were under no illusion that they could kill Imshael, but they could damage him enough that he’d be forced to retreat.

Imshael swept his arm and threw Blackwall against Vivienne.

They went sprawling and struggled to rise.

Imshael raised his arms, ready to smash down with his fists.

Shit—

Lavellan threw his hook and chain at the back of Imshael’s head and looped it around a horn. He propelled forward. His momentum helped bury his daggers through the thick hide. Lavellan wrenched and twisted the blades as best as he could.

Imshael roared, attempted to shake Lavellan off.

The blades cracked.

Oh no.

Imshael started backing into the wall.

Lavellan unlooped the chain and jumped off Imshael's back so wouldn't become paste.

Imshael hit the wall and roared. It must have driven Lavellan’s daggers even deeper. Imshael scrambled at his back but couldn’t reach the daggers.

Weapon — Lavellan needed a new weapon. He looked around frantically, overwhelmed once more at the mess of limbs waving about everywhere as they fought and the quick flashes of metal, magic, and lyrium.

He glanced at Varric and Ellana for help, but they were fighting off a Behemoth.

Lavellan scanned the area for any fallen weapons.

Sounds of the surrounding melees in his ears, smell of artificial lyrium and metal and the signature sweet lightning of magic in his lungs.

Imshael shifted back into a Fear demon and rushed towards Lavellan with an enraged screech.

Weapon, weapon—

Sword.

Lavellan dove for the fallen sword, scrambled up in time to parry one of Imshael’s many limbs.

The sword's weight was awkward in his hands, but his body remembered enough to keep him alive.

Thank his old demon spawn of a Warleader for forcing him to train with swords.

Lavellan gritted his teeth and put his back into the next strike, managed to sever one of the limbs. The sword continued in its momentum and dealt a cut across Imshael's torso.

Imshael retaliated with a slash across Lavellan's side. The barrier from the bone amulet flared once more.

"Getting tired, Bel?" Imshael crooned.

Lavellan couldn't answer, pressed one hand to his wound. He regathered his breaths as the barrier granted him a short reprieve.

Until Imshael shattered it.

Lavellan tried to dodge but the muscles in his legs locked in place.

No—

A golden figure approached in Lavellan's periphery.

And they rammed their shield into Imshael with a battle cry, a lion's head embossed on their breastplate.

"Ser Michel," Lavellan said, breathless from either the shock or the fatigue. Likely both.

"Inquisitor, I am here to lend my assistance." He passed Lavellan a healing potion.

Lavellan laughed, a little woozy as he took it. "Oh good," he said.

Ser Michel engaged Imshael while Lavellan downed the potion, rummaging through his pouches for the last roll of the bandages. He wrapped his wound haphazardly and took a step, ignoring the searing lances of pain from the cut.

Together, he and Michel pushed Imshael back.

And little by little, the Inquisition whittled away at the Behemoth's numbers. More forces could focus on Imshael.

"Return to the abyss, demon," Michel spat. "You are outnumbered."

Imshael dodged Michel's slash and danced away from the other soldiers with a laugh, his front a weave of oozing cuts.

"So it seems. We've had a fun party," Imshael said and fixed his eyeless face at Lavellan. "Here's a parting gift. Just for you."

He turned and rushed at Solas, who felled the last of the Behemoths. His back was exposed.

Fuck—

Lavellan smashed a flask of lightning over himself for speed and sprinted. He cried out a warning.

Solas turned, already gearing for a spell, but no, he wouldn't make it.

One of Imshael's limbs struck.

Lavellan came between them.

The sharp limb glanced off Lavellan's breastplate, followed the slope of it and screeched against the metal.

Stabbed through his shoulder instead.

Lavellan jerked back at the force of it, bit down on his cry and hacked that limb clean off. He followed through with a stab into Imshael's neck.

Imshael raised his remaining limbs, ready for another strike—

Solas grabbed Imshael's face and flooded a concentrated spill of lightning into him. The overwhelming press of magic staggered Lavellan but Solas supported him. The lightning brightened.

"Leave," bid Solas.

Imshael cackled, though the sound was thin.

"How sweet," he mocked. His body crumbled into wisping fragments of black and emerald until Lavellan's sword was left stabbing through empty air. Black blood dripped down the blade. The last of Solas' lightning fizzled away.

Lavellan dropped the sword with a clang. He staggered back, bowled over by the sudden rush of dizziness, and only stayed upright because of Solas.

There was no breath in anyone left to cheer. Not after a harrowing fight, not after bodies of their comrades lay bleeding over the stones.

Solas gently set him down into a sitting position. He grabbed the severed limb still protruding out of Lavellan's shoulder and attempted to pull it out, but that triggered a flash of hot white pain. Lavellan cried out. Solas stopped and examined it.

"It will be quicker to push it through rather than pull it out," said Solas. "But that will damage the area further."

Lavellan couldn't move his arm. Left arm.

Panic clogged his throat.

"Get it out, just get it out," Lavellan said through clenched teeth.

Solas grabbed the severed limb on the sharp, tapered end and braced his hand against Lavellan's shoulder.

"On three," said Solas. "One—"

He pulled it out.

"Dread Wolf's fucking ballsack!" Lavellan clutched at the wound that now felt as if it was on fire, but the movement pulled on the cut on his side. He hissed at the double wave of pain. "You son of

a bitch, you said three!”

“The tendon has been damaged but I believe I can heal it,” said Solas and took Lavellan’s hand off it so he could take a closer look. Solas hovered his glowing hand over the wound, but his magic spluttered. He scowled.

“Your mana is exhausted,” said Lavellan, lightheaded. “It’s alright. Just—”

“It is not alright.”

“This isn’t enough to kill me.”

“Do you think I enjoy seeing you hurt?”

Lavellan scanned the aftermath of the battle. “Get someone— to Vivienne. She collided with Blackwall. Blackwall’s walking metal.”

The Inquisition healers arrived in droves. Vergala perched beside Lavellan.

“Healers,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, grinned, a little out of sorts. “Oh, you’re so clever. Good on you. You’re wonderful.”

“You are losing blood,” muttered Solas as he flagged one of the healers. “Get me a lyrium potion,” he told them.

Lavellan shot him a confused look. “You hate lyrium potions.”

“It matters not. They are necessary.”

The healer returned with two lyrium potion bottles.

Fen’Harel agent, Lavellan noted foggily. Said agent worked on cleaning Lavellan’s wound as Solas finished the potions. Solas made a face but shook his head.

“Solas—”

“Hush. Lie back.” He set Lavellan down with care, even took his coat off and folded it so it would cushion Lavellan’s head. Lavellan couldn’t suppress his smile.

This time, Solas’ magic answered.

“This may hurt,” warned Solas.

“I’ve had worse,” said Lavellan.

He weathered through the pain and discomfort as Solas healed the wound. The sky was darkening above them.

“Hanon!” Ellana’s face swam into his view and she knelt beside him. “Do you need help?” she asked Solas.

“How are you with healing spells?”

“Enough to patch up the other one. I’ll leave that one to you.”

“That will do, thank you.”

Their conversation dulled in his ears and black invaded the edges of Lavellan’s vision. Everything hurt. He wanted to sleep.

He closed his eyes.

Someone set him down gently onto a soft surface.

Lavellan opened his eyes blearily, eyelids feeling stiff and heavy. Actually, his entire body felt stiff and heavy. It was dim around them.

Someone pulled a blanket over him and brushed his hair off his forehead. He couldn’t see them too well.

Lavellan whispered, “Dirthamen?”

The figure leaned closer to hear him better. Lavellan finally caught the colour of their eyes. Crystalline.

“Solas,” he murmured and closed his eyes. Oh, that was fine. He was safe here too.

Solas murmured something in return but Lavellan fell back asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Petition for Lavellan to stop getting himself stabbed because of an ancient elven god.

Chapter hasn't been beta-read so apologies for the dodgy action scene.

Translation

[1] **Ha'ma'lin**: Big brother [\[1\]](#)

Answers out of reach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

decode the open book—

Fitful. Flames.

There would be no mercy for him.

Lavellan met the righteous, rigid face beyond the walls of fire.

“For crimes against the empire—”

Lavellan woke up coated in an unbearable heat that slowly vanished as he regained full cognition.

What the hell was that?

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and turned his head, found Ellana and Solas conversing in a corner, their faces grim.

“Is this a funeral?” rasped Lavellan, wincing as he slowly pushed himself up, his stiff limbs protesting the action. He must be bruised and injured to the Void and back.

Ellana’s expression lit up in relief and she made her way over, helped him sit up.

“Take it easy,” she said.

They'd wrapped his torso with bandages and his armour had been taken off, leaving him in a loose shift, the fabric clinging to his sweat-coated skin. His raven cloak was folded at the foot of the bed, and he almost missed Vergala asleep atop it since she blended in with the feathers.

“You two looked very solemn back there,” said Lavellan. “Did something happen?”

“You were impaled by an ancient demon,” said Solas, frowning. “Is that not enough to warrant worry?”

“When you say it with that face, anything sounds serious.”

“You were bleeding out and you could have lost functionality of your arm.”

Lavellan paused. He rolled his left shoulder, lifted the arm, and flexed his fingers. Still mobile. No bandages or scarring. Solas must have healed it well.

“Thank you for healing me,” Lavellan murmured.

Solas’ stern look softened. “And thank you for defending me. I only wish the cost had not been this.”

“Well, I’m still alive.”

“Lethallin, most people go their lives without being stabbed.”

Lavellan almost laughed. He'd gotten stabbed twice, and yet, that still wasn't the most eventful thing to have happened to him.

"Most people," said Lavellan. He looked down, wrung the blanket between his fingers. "I'm sorry. I know I promised to be careful, then I go off battling an ancient Desire demon with a *sword*. A fucking sword, Solas. Do I look like a sword person to you?" His daggers had been broken too. He hoped they were still stuck in Imshael's back and giving him grief.

"Guess who's smug in their grave?" mused Ellana.

Lavellan grumbled beneath his breath. "Don't start. I can feel him giving me that smug look of his. And he's buried all the way in the Marches."

"Who is this?" asked Solas.

"The previous Warleader, Hanathir. He was the one who trained me. He always made me practice with a sword even though I preferred the daggers."

"That was pragmatic of him."

Lavellan opened his mouth to complain more, but his stomach grumbled and startled everyone in the room. Ellana snorted.

Solas smiled. "I will see if I can procure some food for you." He glanced at Ellana. "Don't let him leave the room."

"I'll knock him out if he does."

"Hey!" said Lavellan.

Solas chuckled and left them, the door clicking softly behind him.

Lavellan stared at the door, chewing on his lip. He'd expected Solas to start grilling him for answers immediately, but maybe he was holding off since Lavellan had just woken up.

But those were problems for later. He looked at Ellana.

"Are you hurt?" he asked softly.

"Bruised ribs, but I'll manage." She frowned. "I've... never been in a battle that intense before."

His grip tightened around the blanket. "I'm sorry. I know they can be a lot. If you want to skip out on them—"

She shook her head. "I can handle myself just fine. It's just... You've been doing things like this? For how long?" Her voice went quiet. "How many times have you had death hanging over your head?"

He'd lost count. Lavellan gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm used to them, it's fine."

"You're *used* to them?" She rubbed her face. "Fenedhis. You shouldn't have had to get used to them in the first place."

Lavellan sighed to himself and shuffled to the side, patting the spot beside him. She sat, fiddling with her sleeves.

“What did Imshael offer you?” she asked.

“All of my memories back,” he said. “And promising that he’d leave peacefully, which would have kept everyone safe.”

“Knowledge and others’ safety. He really got your desires nailed down.”

“I shouldn't have let him talk so much. It gave him the time to study me.”

"I did tell you," she sighed. "But then again, he's good at that, right? Knowing how to appeal to you so you keep listening to him."

"What did everyone make of Imshael recognising me?" he asked, apprehensive.

“I think most just dismissed it as creepy demons being creepy demons. Most people don’t want to dwell on something they don’t understand. Your defeat of Imshael is the more common topic. Soldiers’ tales and all.” She drummed her fingers on her thighs. “But you may have made a few of your friends suspicious.”

“They’re already suspicious.” He leaned back against the headboard.

“I’d watch out for Solas,” said Ellana. “He’s been observing you a little more closely ever since the temple. He’s also been subtly prying about your past during our lessons.”

“What about?”

“They’re just casual questions. He always frames it as being curious about our Dalish upbringing. I try not to reveal too much, but even that reveals something.” She grimaced. “Honestly, he stresses me out sometimes. But he *is* very knowledgeable.”

He stared at her. Had she figured Solas out yet?

“How are your lessons progressing?” he asked.

“Good. It’s a little complicated, but Solas has been showing me a few tricks that the ancient elves once used to make the process easier. I also asked him if he could teach me how to reach another mage’s dream even if they’re far away.”

He frowned. “How come?”

“I want to speak to Keeper Deshanna myself. Try to get you the first Keeper’s journal as soon as possible. And...” She rubbed the back of her neck and shot him a small smile. “And maybe I could drag you along one day and you can talk to the Keeper too.”

His heart warmed and he smiled back. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

Vergala stirred from her sleep and woke up. She gave a little caw once she saw him and hopped over, settling on his lap. He patted her crest.

“I’ve been hunting Fen’Harel in my dreams,” Ellana said softly. Lavellan stopped. “But he never confronts me. If I do catch him, he wakes me up.”

“What are you after?”

“Payback, I suppose.”

Lavellan gently played with the ends of Vergala's feathers. "I already made him pay. And I didn't feel any better."

She looked away, staring at the far wall with a blank expression, but there's a bitter light in her eyes.

"I genuinely enjoy learning from him, you know?" she said. "And I think he enjoys teaching me, but every time, I'm reminded that it could all be an act on his end. I don't ever want to think of him as a friend."

Lavellan froze. He slowly looked up at her.

"Why do you look so surprised?" she asked. "The clues were all there. They're painfully obvious if you know where to look."

He huffed out a soft laughter to himself. "I felt like an idiot once I figured it out. It took me a while."

"Well, love is blind."

"Or it was too much of a leap to assume your friend is the trickster god."

"Fen'Harel comes in friendly forms. You'd always bragged that you'd know if it was Fen'Harel or not. Remember that?"

Lavellan grimaced. "I was thirteen and full of false confidence."

"Who knows? Maybe you would've figured it out if you hadn't fallen for him. You have terrible taste in men, by the way."

He laughed. Ellana smiled, reaching over to pat Vergala, but her smile vanished as a contemplative look settled over her face.

"I'll stop hunting him," she promised and looked up at him, eyes sharp. "But the moment he hurts you again, I'll see to it that my arrow punches clean through his throat."

"What if I'm the one who ends up hurting him?" he murmured.

She blinked in surprise, but she didn't get the chance to respond because the door opened and Solas returned with a tray piled high with fruit and bread and small wheels of cheese. Ellana easily shifted into her easy-going demeanour.

"Did you bring an entire banquet or something?" she asked.

Solas set the tray down on the bedside table. "When I mentioned that it was for the Inquisitor, the cooks piled more food upon the tray. It was hardly my fault."

"He's really getting pampered."

Lavellan elbowed her. "I just got stabbed."

"Where'd your big, macho, 'I'm fine, I've had worse' speech go?" she teased. "Look at him, Solas. He's being a baby when it suits him."

"I'm disowning you," said Lavellan.

“Too bad, I did it first.” Ellana snorted and stood. “Well! I need to go check up on a few of the injured. I promised Sister Azalia that I’d help her.” She waved at them with a small smile and left the two alone, closing the door behind her.

Well, that was a rather abrupt exit.

“Your sister is wary around me,” noted Solas after a few beats of silence.

“What gave you that impression?”

“She has an agitated presence in the Fade whenever we have lessons.” He sat where Ellana had and smiled softly at Vergala being petted by Lavellan. “Or it could be that she has been through much and is leery of trusting others. I suppose I mustn’t jump to conclusions.”

“She said she enjoys learning from you. I wouldn’t worry.”

Solas merely hummed in response.

Neither of them said anything for a while, but Lavellan could see that Solas was thinking, judging by the look in his eyes.

“Imshael called you a peculiar name,” said Solas.

Here it came. Lavellan’s mouth dried but he showed no outward reaction.

“It was grammatically incorrect at that,” Lavellan said.

Solas let out a small, surprised bark of laughter. “Yes, I suppose it is strange to call someone ‘innumerable men.’”

“He seemed unhinged. I wouldn’t take anything he says seriously. He’s quite slippery.”

Solas stared at him, then glanced at the raven cloak at the foot of the bed. He frowned to himself. Lavellan tensed slightly.

“You murmured something in your sleep,” said Solas.

“Did I?”

“It sounded like...” He paused. Lavellan’s pulse picked up. What had he said? He remembered waking up briefly, but he couldn’t remember what he’d done or said. Solas shook his head. “No, it was too soft for me to discern.”

“Probably something really stupid,” said Lavellan, offered Solas a grin.

Solas smiled back, but it felt more like a courtesy than a sincere smile. “Probably,” he agreed.

“What did Imshael tempt you with?”

“The prospect of everybody’s safety. He showed me false visions of my friends struggling to fight just to rattle me.”

“And the knowledge?” He looked Lavellan in the eye. “He offered information.”

Lavellan returned his gaze, steady. “Everyone wants information.”

“Your sister seeks a spirit of Knowledge.”

“The world is being threatened by a supposed god,” said Lavellan. “We’d all like to be armed with information that could delay the possible end of the world.”

Lavellan caught the ghost of a smile on Solas’ lips. Gone with a blink. He figured Solas would appreciate the double meaning.

“You really think Imshael and I are acquainted?” Lavellan asked.

“I never know what to think when it comes to you.”

“Not an answer, though I’m flattered.”

“Do you enjoy being perplexing?”

Lavellan fiddled with a thread fraying from his blanket. “Better than being an open book. I can’t afford to be one.”

“Do you wish you were?” asked Solas, his voice growing softer.

“I wish I was in a situation where I was able to be one.” He glanced at Solas. “Do *you* wish you were an open book?”

“I wish people cared to open the book,” he murmured, then smiled. “Simultaneously, I wish for them to leave the book well alone. Some books are best left closed.”

“Ah. Forbidden book, are you?”

“Esoteric.”

“I’m good at opening things best left closed.”

“Using a brick, I presume?”

Lavellan burst into laughter and startled Vergala. Solas did smile sincerely this time.

“It was efficient and effective,” said Lavellan.

“Eat.”

Lavellan grinned, gently placed Vergala down beside him and grabbed the platter of food. They shared the bread and cheese as they moved onto safer topics such as the state of the Inquisition and Suledin Keep. A few of his friends visited once the news of him waking up had spread. The room became rowdy as the numbers grew.

A few of them watched him, puzzling him out. Namely, Varric, Bull, and Vivienne. They didn’t bring anything up though.

Once Lavellan felt well enough to get up and move around, Solas and Vivienne gave him the clear to leave the room but barred him from any strenuous activities.

He dressed in more suitable clothes, donned his raven cloak and stepped outside.

There was still much to be done within Suledin Keep. Most of them were managerial tasks, but he also visited a few of the soldiers to thank them.

As the afternoon fell, Lavellan retreated to a less occupied corridor within the keep and followed it

to a small overlook to take a break. He stared out at the rest of Emprise, the land looking as if it were bleeding due to the remaining influences of the red lyrium. It would take a while to recover. Maybe even years.

Uneven footsteps approached behind him. Lavellan turned.

“Inquisitor,” greeted Michel. He was limping slightly.

“Ser Michel,” Lavellan returned.

He chuckled to himself, a little self-deprecatingly. “You’ve been calling me that, but I’m afraid I’m no longer a ser. I have not been in a while.”

Lavellan examined him a little more closely. He couldn’t have been that much older than Lavellan. In the previous timeline, Michel had helped in the fight against Solas, although Lavellan couldn’t be sure whether he’d been present for the final battle or not.

“Your leg?” asked Lavellan.

“Just a sprained ankle. You suffered the more grievous injury.” His expression twisted, and he bowed his head in shame. “I apologise for my late arrival. Thank you for your assistance with Imshael.”

“Thank you as well. You came at an opportune moment. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could’ve held out against him.”

“I am glad. Although, I’m also deeply ashamed that you’ve had to fix my folly.” He raised his head, frowning. “It was my mistake which led to Imshael being freed to roam the world. I had sworn to correct it and yet... And yet I once again had to leave it to more capable hands.”

“It couldn’t be helped. When it came down to it, your first instinct was to protect instead of claim glory.”

“I was never here to claim glory. Only to fix my wrongs.”

Lavellan could find no responses to that. An awkward few seconds of silence passed.

He glanced at Michel’s lion-embossed breastplate. “You were a chevalier?”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Lavellan fell silent for a long moment once more, but it was more pensive than awkward.

“I haven’t had good experiences with chevaliers,” said Lavellan.

Michel merely nodded. “Many are more concerned with appearances or power, but some are truly honourable. I am sorry you have had to interact with those who would give the chevaliers and our code of honour a bad name.”

Code of honour. What did that matter? Once you were a chevalier, that meant you had passed the final trial that the Academy gave. To ‘test your blade’ against supposed lowlives in the slums. Most, if not all of the time, that was but a lie and the chevaliers would instead slaughter innocents.

No chevalier was honourable.

“What is the final test, Michel?” Lavellan asked, voice and expression turning hard.

Michel looked down.

“How many?” Lavellan asked. *How many elves have had to pay with their blood for your honour?*

Softly, he answered, “Five.”

“Five,” Lavellan repeated, almost whispering. He looked away. “Your honour is founded on blood and I do not acknowledge it.”

“I had no other choice, Inquisitor. My entire identity was already—I was in a precarious position.”

Because Orlais was no friend to the elves. Someone with elven blood would not have been accepted into the Academy.

“A nobleman saw me fighting and thought I deserved a chance,” said Michel. “He risked his reputation to craft a false identity for me so that I may enter the Academy. It was my chance at a better life. A chance to live a fulfilling life dedicated to protection and valour. I seized it.”

Lavellan rubbed his face. And he couldn’t begrudge Michel for seizing that chance at a better life. It was better than wasting away in the slums.

Michel clenched his hands at his sides. “And every day, the deception felt like a sword resting at the back of my neck. It could be used against me, against the empress, if it was ever found out. If I hesitated at the final trial, everything that had been sacrificed to get me there would have been for nothing.” He shook his head. “Inquisitor, I know you hold no fondness for me, but I have a strong arm and a stout heart, and I still care for Orlais. If you will allow me, I would like to help the Inquisition in whatever capacity I can.”

“When I accepted the mantle of Inquisitor and raised the sword, I pledged to care for all,” said Lavellan. “No matter their country, no matter their origins, no matter their heritage. If you wish to join the Inquisition, you will have to care for more than just Orlais.”

He squared his shoulders and met Lavellan’s gaze with a solemn stare. “As I’ve said, my heart is stout. My shield belongs to those who require it.”

Lavellan regarded him, the grave and determined set of his expression reminiscent of something. Someone.

“I’ve made the Inquisition a place where you are judged by your current actions rather than the blood in your veins or your past transgressions,” said Lavellan. “So long as you act in the same manner and you don’t continue your wrongdoings. It won’t be easy. There are many elves, and even humans within the Inquisition who have suffered under the hands of the chevaliers. You are welcome in the Inquisition, but you have your work cut out for you.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

Lavellan pursed his lips, thinking over his next words. “And I can’t erase the years of fear and shame you’ve suffered, and still suffer, and I know any sentiments I tell you to be proud of your heritage will ring hollow. But if you ever wish to explore your elven heritage, I and a few others are more than willing to share our stories.”

“How did you—I never specified I was—” He couldn’t finish the rest of his sentence, looking as if a mage had encased him in a sheet of ice.

Lavellan softened his gaze and laid a gentle hand on Michel's shoulder. “It’s alright. I made the

deduction on my own, and I won't share it with anybody else. That's up to you."

Michel looked down again, frowning to himself. "I suppose hiding it doesn't matter now. I've already been disgraced for my deception." He raised his head. "The only way left to go is up."

It wasn't the response Lavellan had expected.

Then again, those driven by duty knew how to return and rise, rearing and ready.

Something about this struck him as familiar again.

Michel bowed and Lavellan retracted his hand. "I have preparations to make. Thank you for the opportunity, Inquisitor. I will try to be worthy of it." He paused. "And... I will keep your other words in mind."

"Farewell, Michel."

He nodded and turned to leave, made it a few paces forward, but stopped. A warm, summer breeze blew past.

"I was afraid of them too, once," confessed Michel. "The chevaliers. How they would ride in on horses and kill us in the slums. I wonder what the younger me would have thought of who I am now." He smiled back at Lavellan. "Forgive me, just... thinking out loud."

Michel walked away. Lavellan stared at his back, unsure of what to make of anything. He sighed and faced the expanse of the Emprise below him once again.

What would the younger Lavellan think of him now, too? He'd be scared, likely.

Lavellan was still scared.

Vergala arrived and perched on his shoulder.

"People are strange, aren't they?" he murmured. She cawed. "Strange little things."

Lavellan thought of the fiercely determined look on Michel's face and frowned, feeling as if he'd seen that look on someone else before. That same look of ferocious resolve. On whom? Cassandra? Yes, but also... someone else... Someone just as steadfast, just as persevering.

"This is all I am," he says, golden eyes firm behind the mask. "I am the El'amelan's defender. I am your shield."

Lavellan clasps his shoulder. "You are more than a shield. You are a friend."

He blinked, chasing after the memory, but it faded with a whisper.

Who was that? There was something familiar about their eyes and voice, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Someone from the El'amelan, from the sounds of it. Its defender?

Lavellan sighed and leaned against the stone railing. Vergala hopped down to rest beside his arm.

Oh well, the memory would come in due time. In a manageable pace, hopefully. Maybe it was a

good thing he hadn't taken Imshael's offer. Asunara *had* warned him about overwhelming himself with memories, so retrieving them all at once would probably do his head in.

Speaking of Imshael, Lavellan needed to send some of the tissue samples from the red lyrium giant to Dagna. Figure out how the hell Imshael had managed to pull off corrupting a giant. The studies Solas had conducted had also revealed that the ancient magic on the site could augment the properties of red lyrium, hence the hardier Templars.

Mixing red lyrium with ancient elven magic created such a volatile reaction. Was there a link? There must be.

"Red lyrium is blighted lyrium," he murmured. "Because it's a living thing." The blood of the Titans. The Evanuris had poisoned the Titans to win the war.

But what was that poison? What did they use?

The world would end from malice.

And malice was another word for poison.

Lavellan's face fell.

"What did they use?" he whispered furiously to himself. Someone else besides Solas had to know. Asunara? No, she said she wasn't sure either. She said she would look into the memories she'd collected—

Memories.

Lavellan had been present during the war with the Titans. Granted, he was watching Dirthamen, but it didn't matter, Lavellan had still been *there*. And surely a weapon that could debilitate the Titans would have been a well-kept secret, and who else had Lavellan served but the god of secrets? It was possible that Dirthamen had shared the information with him.

Either way, Lavellan could have known what it was. Or at least had some insight on it.

He chewed on his lip, shared a look with Vergala.

He needed his memories back. Soon.

Chapter End Notes

Just a lil recovery chapter, as a treat. I've put you all through the wringer for a while what with the memory bombs, then cliffhanger, then high tension action scenes lmao. Have a breather.

The Arbor Wilds are coming up, but we just need to get through a few more things before we can get there ;)

Here to stay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

in the pigments of home

The Inquisition spent another week or so cleaning up the mess the Red Templars had left behind in Emprise and helping the people of Sahrnia get back on their feet. Once they'd sorted things out, most of the Inquisition's forces rode back to Skyhold while the rest remained to continue helping Emprise.

Lavellan took the tissue samples to Dagna and informed her that he'd left his daggers buried in the back of a primordial Desire demon, ready for a chewing out or a disappointed sigh from her or Harritt.

Harritt only said, "Serves it right." Dagna didn't seem all that saddened either because she dragged Lavellan to her workstation and showed him the early stages of his old daggers' replication. The ones he'd found in the temple.

What had broken them in the first place?

"I'll have it ready within a month," she promised. "Also, I heard that Sister Nightingale got the crystals back from Calpernia. You may want to have a look at that."

"Thank you, Dagna. Don't feel too pressured to hurry with the daggers."

"No pressure at all! It's fascinating, actually. See, the metal used seems to be an alloy of veil quartz and something else but I'm having trouble figuring out what. If I can cross-reference..." She trailed off and mumbled to herself and Lavellan took that to mean the end of their conversation. He chuckled to himself and threw a soft farewell over his shoulder.

He headed for the rookery, found Leliana sitting at the table, staring intently at the memory crystal. She looked up at his arrival.

"Have you watched it?" he asked.

"Not yet. I was waiting for you." She tapped the crystal and the teal wisps of Calpernia and Corypheus materialised in front of them.

"If I can commence my preparations at the Shrine of Dumat—" started Calpernia.

"No," Corypheus cut off.

Her fists clenched at her sides. "Yet you would allow the Red Templars free reign of it."

"Are you questioning me?" he challenged and Calpernia quieted. Corypheus turned and walked away. "If you cannot prepare in the presence of distractions, then perhaps you are not fit to be the Vessel. I will hear no more complaints of this."

Calpernia fumed to herself, but they couldn't watch any further because she found the crystal and destroyed it.

Leliana hummed as the teal wisps dissipated. “Corypheus does not want her there,” she noted.

Because her old master was there, in the prototype of the binding spell that Corypheus intended to use on Calpernia. Strange though, that he would let Samson’s Templars inside.

“I spoke with Commander Cullen,” said Leliana. “Our agents have found Samson’s remaining Red Templars escorting a supply caravan in the wilderness. Could this be close to the shrine that Calpernia spoke of?”

“Highly likely. I need to talk to Cullen and organise a company of soldiers if that’s the case. If we’re successful, we’ll find something to weaken Samson’s armour, and whatever it is Corypheus is hiding from Calpernia.”

He organised the campaign with Cullen, and they rode out to the shrine a few days later with a company of soldiers. The Shrine of Dumat was infested with Red Templars when they arrived.

Cullen did his best to be subtle, but Lavellan could tell he was trying to stop Lavellan from fighting. Or at least minimise the amount of fighting he had to do.

Lavellan would feel babied on any other occasion, but Cullen had a way of doing it that made Lavellan touched instead. So he didn’t bring it up, and only nodded at Cullen in thanks.

Samson wasn’t in the shrine, and his Tranquil friend killed himself so they couldn’t acquire information about Samson, but Erasthenes *was* still in the locked chamber along with a few clues about Samson’s armour that they could take back to Dagna.

Lavellan questioned Erasthenes and then put him out of his misery.

They returned to Skyhold with their new information.

Successfully attacking one of Corypheus’ prominent bases of operations had bolstered the soldiers’ morale, hope in their voices as they spoke of the Inquisition’s future march to the Arbor Wilds.

Lavellan could feel the time running.

An uneasy feeling twisted in his gut.

Two months left.

Lavellan climbed up to his room, feeling the beginning of a headache as he leafed through a report in his hand. He threw it down once he reached his desk, pulling a face at the stack of paperwork waiting for him, but a bright package resting beside the inkwell caught his attention. He picked it up. It was a roll wrapped in red and gold halla wool.

His mood brightened. Clan Venalin’s colours. He removed the cloth, revealing a letter wrapped around an engraved halla antler, decorative patterns carved into its surface. Lavellan spent a while admiring the details, then settled down to read the letter.

Hahren,

How do you start a letter? I don't know. Hello? Hope you like the carved antler. Just a little thank-you gift from the clan. We also arranged to send something to Clan Lavellan. Supplies and all that.

I'm Warleader now. Ceremony went well. Actual leading's a little hard, especially because I'm kind of bossing my friends around? They're not really used to taking me all that seriously and I feel like a bit of a prick with a stick up my ass when I tell them to be serious.

Lavellan continued with the rest of the letter, smiling and laughing at the anecdotes, and growing sombre at the more vulnerable parts.

The end of the letter had an addendum: *If you get the time, can you carve another tiger? Maybe something I can wear that won't get in the way.*

He mulled over his response for a long time and wrote it down. Hopefully it would be helpful. He glanced at the hunting charm around his wrist and smiled again.

Rather than do his paperwork, he planned Revasha's next carving instead. He could send the completed piece back with his response as a little surprise.

Around noon, his door flew open, banging against the stone wall. Lavellan jumped in his seat, already reaching for something he could use as a weapon—

“Quisitree!” hollered Sera. She poked her head up from the stairs, eyes squinting from her smile.

“Creators, Sera,” he breathed and forced himself to relax despite his racing heart. “Knocking is free.”

She blew a raspberry. “No time. Guess what?” She held up a small bag and shook it. “Guess.”

He opened his mouth—

“Chocolate bits!” she yelled in glee, didn't even let him finish. “Wanna snack on them? Or throw them at bigwigs?”

It'd been a while since he'd spent time with Sera. Almost getting crushed by a giant together didn't count.

He was about to agree, but a better idea struck him.

“I've got something else in mind,” he said and carefully put aside the sketches for Revasha's pendant (he'd decided a pendant would be the best choice). He stood and walked towards her, taking off his cloak because things were about to get messy. “Want to bake with me?”

She frowned. “Only thing I do in kitchens is borrow food.”

“Borrow food,” he snorted, left his cloak on the couch. “It's not borrowing if it ends up in your stomach. There's no coming back from that.”

“Still borrowing. Won't get it back though.”

“Yeah, most people call that stealing. They might even call that a crime.”

“Most people are stupid.”

He descended the stairs and she followed.

“So what’s knocking in your head?” she asked.

“We’re going to bake cookies.”

That stopped her.

He stopped as well and smiled gently at her. “You had pride cookies. Want to see what a Sera and Hanon cookie looks like?”

Sera stared at the bag of chocolate bits in her hand. “Brown as shite, probably,” she said, but she drew her arms closer to herself, shoulders hunching as though she were trying to be smaller.

“We don’t have to,” he said. “We can just sit on the roof that smells like bird shit and eat chocolate bits that are going to melt all over our hands.”

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, then shrugged. But the movement looked forced. “Mean, could always blame you when it goes tits up.”

He grinned and slung his arm around her shoulders, made their way to the small kitchen below the Hall. Lavellan waved at the cook and kitchen hands and explained their plan. Soon enough, the ingredients sat waiting in front of them on the table. He rolled up his sleeves.

“Ready?” he asked Sera. She squinted at the recipe book.

“Writing’s all tiny.” She slammed the book shut. “Who needs that? We’ll do it ourselves.”

Lavellan laughed.

Sera tossed the book over her shoulder and shrugged. “That’s their cookie. I want my cookie.”

Lavellan stared at the expensive recipe book now lying face down, some of its pages creased.

“Dorian’s going to murder us,” he said.

“He can wipe his arse with it.”

Some things never changed. Good thing he still sort of remembered how to make cookies.

He didn’t remember how to make cookies.

They squinted at the concoction sitting in the bowl.

“Think it’s good?” Sera asked, pinching off some of the dough and popping it into her mouth.

He smacked her hand. “Quit eating it.”

“Looks right. Tastes right?” She chewed. “Why’s it crunchy?”

He had a bad feeling there was too much sugar, but he was dead certain he’d placed the right amount. Unless Sera had added more while he hadn’t been looking.

"I guess we'll find out," he said. "Let's go flatten them."

Sera, of course, made dick-shaped cookies. Lavellan eventually gave up on making normal cookies and made dick-shaped cookies with her.

She made a ridiculously long one and said, "Solas wishes."

"Sera, that'll break in the oven."

"Something, something, long in the Fade, teeny weeny here."

They popped the tray in the oven.

"Left balls are me, you're the right balls," said Sera. "Sera and Quisitree cookies. Aw, piss! Should've made a tree."

Sera snacked on the leftover chocolate bits as Lavellan dusted himself off and wiped down some of their mess.

"You could help you know," he huffed. She threw chocolate at him in response.

Lavellan wiped the cloth over the flour, fell into his thoughts as he did, juggled through the things he needed to do, made a mental checklist, fretted over anything and everything. The Well's whispers churned like a slow wave.

"Wasn't as much of a dung as I thought it'd be," said Sera, bringing Lavellan out of his head. He glanced at her. "Making cookies, I mean. Don't see what the fuss is about now. She could've learned to make it, I would've helped. But pride cookies. Guess she liked being right more."

"She probably had insecurities that made her act like that. But expressing insecurities in unhelpful ways like that just ends up hurting the people you care about."

"You got them?"

"Of course."

She paused. Then said, "You're real elfy, you know?"

"Yeah?" he said warily, caught off-guard by the sudden topic change.

"But you don't try to make me elfy or get all puckered about it."

"That'll just piss you off."

She snorted in agreement.

"And you're still figuring stuff out," he continued.

She didn't answer, stayed silent for a long moment. Lavellan could tell she wanted to ask something else, but he didn't probe, just settled in the silence and let her collect her thoughts.

"I don't get it," she eventually said. "All magicky and... It doesn't make sense! Fade-y, Veil-y things and Solas talks but he doesn't *talk*. Why do we feel things other people don't? It's weird, innit? I don't like it. I don't want to feel the air being warbly sometimes or pissy the next. And I do hear you and Solas when you talk all elfy." She paused. "Well, not *hear* hear, but I know. But I don't. I don't know! I'm not supposed to; I don't want to."

Sera grabbed a handful of flour and threw it at the empty air. The white cloud lazily drifted down.

“I just want things simple,” she muttered. “And you’re not simple. But I want to like you.”

“I’m not simple?” Lavellan asked. “Because of the whole Herald thing?”

“I— I don’t know. You feel *weirder* now. I mean, you’re already weird but that’s a different weird. Different from a person weird. Like how Bull or Blackwall or Varric is weird. But now you’re like Solas weird. Ugh, I said the word too much. Even weird is weird.”

“What kind of weird?” He threw her another look over his shoulder. Her face scrunched in concentration.

“Dunno. Veil’s weird ‘round you, all wiggly. Mean, it was always weird, but only around your hand. And it was warbly, not wiggly. Then all of you starts making it wiggly. I dunno what you’ve been doing but stop it. I don’t—” She shook her head. “I don’t want you to be a bad weird, right? Be a good weird with us. Stay being a good weird.”

Lavellan put the cloth down and walked over to her, but stopped, unsure of how to respond. Something unknown turned in his chest. He retrieved the cloth and wiped the table down again instead.

“We’re here,” she mumbled. “Just remember that, yeah? *Here* here. People.”

“Well, when you plant a tree, it stays, right?” he asked, grinning. “Quisitree’s got his roots down.”

She snorted and threw flour at him.

“Yeah, like that,” she said, grinning back. “That kind of weird.”

Lavellan’s grin softened into a smile. When Sera turned back to the oven to check on the cookies, his smile faded.

[*Lirath tarasyl’nin tal adhal*](#), [\[1\]](#) said the Well.

“[*Sil su mar’len*](#), [\[2\]](#)” he growled at it.

The Well’s whispers softened.

Their dick-shaped cookies ended up looking deformed and it almost broke their teeth when they bit into it. They decided it a failure for consumption but a success for ammunition.

After an afternoon of pegging rock-hard cookies at people, Sera gave him a high-five and retreated to the tavern. Lavellan reserved one cookie though. He covered it with a cloth and headed towards the rotunda with a barely suppressed smile.

“Good afternoon, lethallin,” Lavellan greeted as he entered, the cookie held behind his back. Solas looked up from whatever he was writing.

“Hello,” he said. “I’ve been hearing about peculiar complaints. It seems that a few unfortunately shaped projectiles were being launched at unassuming bystanders.”

“Strange. And has nothing to do whatsoever with what I’m about to give you.” Lavellan revealed and offered the cloth-wrapped cookie. Solas cautiously took it.

“What is this?”

“It’s edible.”

Solas unwrapped it. Lavellan pursed his lips and managed to suppress his snickers but not his smile. Solas stared at it.

“What is this?” Solas asked.

“I think you know what it is.”

It was the only cookie that had retained its clearly phallic shape.

“You’ve spent too much time with Sera,” said Solas.

“I actually baked it with her.”

“Ah, that does explain everything.” He turned the cookie, examining it. “This does not look edible.”

“Only one way to find out.”

Solas knocked it against the table but the cookie didn’t break or crumble. It was like stone hitting wood.

“You’ve put too much sugar,” said Solas.

“Stop criticising the damn cookie,” Lavellan laughed. “Just eat it.”

“I like having teeth. I would like to keep them.”

“Just a nibble.”

Solas rewrapped the cookie and put it down. He stood. “I finished the mural for your room. Would you like to see it?”

“You’re just trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

Lavellan pursed his lips, trying to maintain his scowl despite Solas’ growing smile.

“Fine,” said Lavellan. “But you’re bringing the cookie with—”

“Excellent. Come, lethallin.” Solas placed his hand on Lavellan’s back and nudged him out of the rotunda, leaving the cookie behind. Lavellan laughed but granted him some mercy and obliged, buzzing with anticipation the whole way up to his quarters.

“When did you finish it?” asked Lavellan.

“It dried fully yesterday. Alexius required my assistance this morning so I was unable to tell you.”

They reached his quarters and stood in the middle of the room, looking up at the wall cloaked by Solas’ magic.

“Ready?” Solas asked.

Lavellan nodded. Solas waved his hand and the air shimmered. The blank wall bled with colour and shape, as though it were a mirage gaining definition, and slowly, the mural revealed itself. Lavellan let out a soft breath.

The mural depicted a scene reminiscent of the Emerald Graves, made Lavellan feel as if he were back within the forest, looking up at the mighty trees. A rain of sunlight needled its way through the canopies, gilding the vibrant emerald leaves, golden light dripping down the ancient trunks. Flowers dotted the forest floor, and—

Lavellan’s eyes widened. Was that...?

He rushed up to the upper walkway and scrutinised the figures he’d picked out within the piece.

It was a white wolf and a red-crested raven playing together, easily missed within the large piece unless you were paying close attention to it.

Those two weren’t the only things hidden within the forest either. There were also aravel sails peering past the trees, some displaying the red and gold colours of Clan Venalin, some displaying the purple and blue of Clan Lavellan. A small herd of halla was nearby with Hanal’ghilan within it, staring skyward.

He searched for more surprises, found figures milling about doing various activities. There was Blackwall with Sera standing on his shoulders, Varric talking to Cassandra and Cullen, the Iron Bull walking beside Dorian and Vivienne. Ellana was sitting beneath a tree with Josephine and Leliana. There was Revasha, perched on a tree branch with her bow, and Scout Harding surveying the forest with her hands on her hips.

Lavellan placed his hand on the wall, warmth building behind his eyes.

Solas had painted home.

He looked down at Solas, who was awaiting Lavellan’s verdict, standing so still — nervous.

“It’s home,” said Lavellan, smiling.

Solas relaxed and smiled back.

Lavellan regarded the piece again, marvelling at the attention to detail, the clever use of colours and silhouettes to draw the eye and lead it through the forest. He brushed his fingers over the wolf and raven.

Solas wasn’t present in the piece. Not as the elf anyway.

What are you trying to tell me?

He looked back at Solas and their gazes met. Something vulnerable bled into Solas’ smile and a silent understanding passed between them.

Lavellan forewent the ladder and jumped over the railing to get down.

Solas’ smile faded in favour of a reproachful look.

Lavellan grinned. “What? It was just a short drop.”

“You are impossible.”

He chuckled, couldn't stop smiling, heart bursting with light and colour as if it had soaked up the warmth of the mural and had made it its own.

“Thank you,” said Lavellan, wishing he could convey this light and warmth within him.

“I hope it is to your liking,” said Solas.

“It's wonderful.”

They gravitated towards the balcony where they spent a moment of silence observing the expanse of the Frostbacks and the thawed river, the bustle of Skyhold.

“You are not wearing the cloak,” Solas noted.

“Didn't want to get flour and egg or something on it. When Sera's in the kitchen, nothing stays clean.”

Bringing Sera up just reminded Lavellan of their earlier conversation. If she could feel the Veil behaving strangely around him, then Solas had definitely picked up on it. So why wasn't he saying anything?

Lavellan leaned his elbows against the railing and resisted sighing. Everything was so complicated.

He looked back at the mural again to calm himself down. He immediately relaxed at the sight of it, his heart still draped in that warmth and light of comfort and home.

It was a good reminder that this was what he was fighting for. Who he was fighting for.

“Please,” Dorian whispered. “Don't live to die. Don't die for us, for them. Live for us. With us.”

“If I can presume to ask,” said Cassandra, “live with us rather than die for us.”

“We're here. Just remember that, yeah? Here here. People.”

He wanted to be here.

Lavellan glanced down at his left hand. “You've studied the Anchor, right?” he asked. “Do you think it can be removed?”

Solas frowned. “That... would be difficult.”

“How so?”

“The Anchor itself is energy, vibrating on the same wavelength as the Veil. That allows you your connection to the Fade. Your entire body houses that energy, concentrating at the central point when you focus it, which would be your hand. To remove it, you must first gather all that energy and removed it with the aid of the orb. I suspect Corypheus was unable to reclaim it at Haven because he had failed to gather the Anchor in one place.” He made a soft sound and looked away. “The process of removal will likely be harrowing on your part.”

“I am well acquainted with pain.”

Solas looked back at him gravely. “You may lose your arm. Accumulating all of it in one place... It would turn your flesh into nothing but magic.”

Lavellan's gaze saddened. "When Wisdom stopped me from keeping the sunder open, she told me that if I'd continued, I would have exacerbated the Anchor's condition prematurely."

Sorrow briefly flashed in Solas' eyes and he looked away.

"What are you not telling me?" asked Lavellan.

Solas had never told him in the first timeline that the Anchor was killing him. Why hadn't he? He'd *known* it would destroy Lavellan, *known* it would cause unimaginable pain as the years progressed, that it would disintegrate his flesh into a soup of light and pain.

Did Solas just not have the means to remove it?

"If they must die, I would rather they die in comfort."

Lavellan's heart twisted. Had that been it? He hadn't wanted Lavellan to live knowing his death was near? Had he seen that as a mercy?

Solas lowered his gaze. "I... suspect that you cannot hold onto it for long. It may grow too powerful and prove to be life-threatening."

"You suspect," Lavellan repeated, an edge to his tone. "And how long have you suspected?"

He didn't answer.

"Were you ever going to tell me that my time was limited?"

"I did not want to tell you without concrete evidence," he said.

But Fen'Harel had said with such conviction that the Anchor would kill Lavellan. Who was lying?

"Is that the truth?" Lavellan asked. "It's a suspicion and not a fact?"

"I was hoping it wasn't true," said Solas and there was a sincerity and almost desperation to his voice that couldn't be false. "But seeing its condition with Wisdom... It confirms my worst fears."

So then, had he been trying to scare Lavellan when he'd claimed as Fen'Harel that Lavellan would die? Was that supposed to make him feel better?

Lavellan rubbed his face and hung his head.

"Fine," muttered Lavellan. "When this is over, and we've closed all the rifts, I want you to remove the Anchor."

"Despite the risks?"

"Despite the risks." Many had dismissed him not fit for fighting anymore, had thought him no longer any danger or threat, useless. Just because he'd lost a limb? They had all acted as if it was the end of him.

It had been so infuriating. Disheartening. But he'd managed. He could manage again.

"You would sacrifice a limb to continue living?" asked Solas.

"My friends asked me to live with them." His lips twisted. "A man told me I'm not helping anyone by living to die."

Solas' eyes widened.

"Why do you look so surprised?" asked Lavellan.

"I... I do not know. Perhaps I have been so accustomed to yelling at an immovable wall."

"Is the immovable wall me or people in general?"

"Both."

Lavellan sighed. "I have met people I have grown to love dearly. I want to stay with them. Live with them. I want to greet another day, share another laugh. Fuck dying young. I want to grow old." He clenched his hands and stared at the mountains stretched out ahead of him with a set expression. "I want to live."

His declaration settled in the quiet.

"I know I can be stubborn," continued Lavellan, "and sometimes it's hard to listen. Not because I don't value your counsel. I value it. It means a lot to me." Solas' gaze flickered up at him, vulnerable once again, shadows within his eyes. "But you're right. Ultimately, I can't help anyone by barrelling headfirst into death. No matter how much I've eluded it. It's hard but... I'll try."

Lavellan watched the sky. It was softening into a peachy hue as dusk approached.

"You look so weary," Solas said. "You have always looked so weary. Ever since I met you."

No, he had not been weary the first time they'd met.

"The years press on," Lavellan said instead. "So many that I care about have died. Some from my hand. I should have died with them."

During that cursed day, he should have died with Solas and Cassandra.

His heart wrung. "He sacrificed everything," Lavellan found himself saying. "Himself. Everyone else. I was so angry. Sometimes I wonder if I should have tried harder to..." He couldn't finish his sentence.

Solas placed his hand over Lavellan's and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "He made his choice. It is not your responsibility."

Solas turned his back on Lavellan. Lavellan screamed.

"But I loved him," Lavellan admitted, voice breaking. "I loved him, Solas. I just wish..." He swallowed the thickness in his throat. "I just wish I could've asked him why he—" Lavellan shook his head, stared right at Solas. "I want to look him in the eye and ask *why*. Why, Solas, *why*?"

Solas looked back at him, torn, but it was likely due to the distress in Lavellan's voice over the question. It was a punch to the gut. This was not the Solas he wanted answers from.

Lavellan closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath as he turned away.

"Never mind," said Lavellan, resigned. "I do know why. No matter. He's gone now."

"What was his name?" Solas asked softly.

Does it matter? "Names give power and he has enough over me." Lavellan forced some cheeriness

back into his tone and expression, tried to smile. “Ah, but I’m sorry for raining on your parade. And after making such a wonderful mural too.”

His gaze softened. “You need not do that. You do not have to put up a front.”

Lavellan’s smile slowly faded. He stared at Solas’ hand over his, and cautiously, turned his hand over and threaded their fingers together.

“Neither do you,” Lavellan murmured.

They both stared at their joined hands, unable to look each other in the eye. Solas opened his mouth, then closed it, battling internally with something for a while.

“I...” said Solas. His brows scrunched. “Mahanon, I’m...”

Solas quieted, his internal turmoil growing. He eventually gave a small, defeated sigh, so soft that Lavellan almost missed it. He squeezed Lavellan’s hand again instead and smiled.

“I’m glad to have met you,” was what Solas said.

It wasn’t what he’d meant to say, but it was just as true as *I’m Fen’Harel*.

Lavellan was alright with that for now.

Together, they watched the sun set over the mountain peaks, weaving the threads of their shared silence to say what they couldn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Sera, my beloved. You are so hard to write.

Lavellan really just told Solas to eat a dick, huh?

But yeah! Mural has been unveiled, and emotions are flying everywhere. (Emotions? In *my* fic? It's more likely than you think)

Translation

[1] **Lirath tarasyl’nin tal adhal:** Unless a storm uproots the tree^[1]

[2] **Sil su mar'len:** Mind your own business (lit. mind to yourself)^[1]

The fall of the false griffon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

the dead do not atone

“Something interesting has happened in Val Royeaux,” said Josephine during a War Council.

“Oh?” he asked. “Good or bad?”

She frowned down at her board. “It appears a group of scholars have begun protesting through the market streets, demanding that the University of Orlais be open to everyone, starting with the elves.”

“So... it’s good, right?”

“There was a little accident,” said Leliana. “It involved fire and an unfortunate warehouse.”

“Mostly good,” he amended.

“And they claimed to be close friends of the Inquisition to avoid punishment. The Orlesian authorities are requesting for a clarification. The scholars have also sent a letter of apology and a few gifts to make up for the lie.”

He grinned. “Well, *now* we’re close friends, whoever they are. Not a lie at all.”

“Inquisitor,” said Josephine with a warning tone.

He laughed and raised his hands up in placation. “Alright, alright. We’ll release a formal statement.”

“Very good. What would you like to say?”

“That they were not acting under my name or orders, but I support their cause. As for the Orlesian authorities, tell them we’ll pay for the damages.” He paused, then smiled. “Also, say that I call for our allies within the Orlesian court to support Empress Celene’s original plans to open the University to all. Celene was already working on it, wasn’t she? Until the entire civil war, at least.”

“Very well, Inquisitor,” said Josephine, writing down his response.

“Testing your influence, are we?” asked Leliana with a small smile.

“Their favour won’t last long. May as well pull a few strings while they’re still strong,” Lavellan said. “Any other news?”

His three advisors glanced at each other.

“Cassandra has found the whereabouts of the missing Seekers,” said Cullen.

“Oh,” said Lavellan. “Oh dear.”

Lavellan, Varric, and Vivienne accompanied Cassandra to Caer Oswin where they confronted the Lord Seeker, then returned to Skyhold with the book Lucius had passed onto her. Cassandra retreated with it, quiet and subdued. Varric watched her go, brows furrowed in worry.

“It would be best if we give her some time to absorb the recent events,” said Vivienne.

“Yeah,” murmured Varric.

It was disconcerting to see their most stalwart friend looking defeated.

Lavellan checked up on her that afternoon. Cassandra was in the armoury, the book in front of her on the table, her head in her hands. She looked up at his arrival.

“Inquisitor,” she greeted, looking weary. “I was... reading. I think you’d like to hear this.”

He pulled up a seat and sat across her. “What have you found?”

Cassandra took a deep breath, then opened the book. She flipped through the pages, explaining the Rite of Tranquility, its possible reversal, and the corruption within the Seekers. The further along the story she got, the more her shoulders fell. Once she finished, she pushed off the chair and stood, facing out the window.

“Power becomes its own master,” said Cassandra. “We cast aside ideals in favour of expedience and tell ourselves it was necessary. For the people.” She looked at him. “Will that happen to us? Will we repeat history?”

Lavellan sighed. “At some point, we should lay down the sword. The repeat becomes a real threat when we continue to carry the sword even when it’s no longer needed.” The Inquisition of old had become an abominable force. He couldn’t let that happen. They had to stop at the peak before the decline.

“But how do you know when it is time?” she asked.

Usually, a council of old people tell you you’re overstepping your bounds.

“We’ll see the beginning of it, I think. When that happens, we sit down and discuss it.”

“Perhaps the fall begins when secrets are allowed to fester,” she said, and his breath hitched.

“When you act to survive rather than serve, as the Seekers did.” Her expression hardened. “That is *not* the Maker’s work.”

Lavellan considered her determined gaze. “You want to rebuild them.”

“Without secrets,” she said. “I cannot be the only Seeker left. I will find the others scattered to the winds, one by one, and we will all read this book, and establish a new charter together. The Maker’s work in truth.” The determined light in her eyes flickered, the first glimpse of uncertainty. “Do you think it possible?”

“Of course I do,” he said without hesitation. He’d seen it for himself. “You’re determined, and faithful, but not to the point of fault or blindness. You’re an honest woman. And we need more honesty in the world. Truth.” He cast his gaze down. “Amid all the secrets.” How ironic that he had become a symbol of light when the secrets had once been his domain. “Rebuild them into

something better.”

She huffed and sat back down. “Do they deserve it?”

“You can make them deserving,” said Lavellan.

“You would place such faith in me?”

“Just as you have with me.” He offered her a small smile. “You have the drive, and you care about this. It’s personal.”

“Perhaps too personal.”

“With something like this, you’d hope it was personal. Otherwise, things just go to shit.”

She clasped her hands over the table and was quiet for a long moment.

“I will think on it,” Cassandra eventually said. She looked up and gave him a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Mahanon. I could not have done this alone.”

“And thank you as well.”

Her smile morphed into a confused look. “What for?”

“I just...”

His mind flashed to all the times she’d stood by his side, talking or knocking sense into him, being his shield on the battlefield, being his pillar when he’d felt close to crumbling.

“I couldn’t have done this alone, either.”

He sat on the battlements, carving Revasha’s pendant as his thoughts wandered, but they always circled back to what Cassandra had said.

“The fall begins when secrets are allowed to fester.”

Some part of him rejected it, the part that had been dependent on the shadows. The part that had walked within it.

And now, he was one of the most well-known people in Thedas. Too much light.

“Someone has written an account about you,” says Asunara with mild amusement, reading the scroll in her hands.

“Destroy it,” he says.

Her gaze snaps up in surprise. “Would this not discourage people from misbehaving? Knowing that they are being watched?”

“It will make them vigilant. I’m meant to be forgotten.” Lavellan holds his hand out

and she gives him the scroll. He reads through it with a small hum.

And sets it on fire.

“I want to assign you as the Master of the Archives,” he tells her. “You will oversee the El’amelan’s written records, and you will help me keep Dirthamen’s secrets since you’ve proven to have the mental tenacity for them. I also want you to ensure that any information about me is destroyed.”

“You cannot be completely forgotten. People tell stories.”

“Stories twist. Stories can obfuscate. I can hide within them.”

“Written information can also be manipulated.”

“They can still make it easier to track the truth. Subjective retellings are less reliable.” He crosses his arms. “It’s better this way.”

She bows her head. “Vin, Ras’virelan.”

Lavellan hummed to himself. It made perfect sense, of course, but...

“Cut the guy with memory loss some slack,” he grumbled.

Still, it must have been nice being invisible to the public. Although, he now felt differently about other people’s stories and how their retellings would twist. He’d welcomed the truth being lost in Elvhenan, but now, he wanted to preserve it, to keep himself, because everyone’s worship had taken enough out of him.

How had Dirthamen felt about being worshipped?

The squeal and laughter of children caught his attention. Lavellan turned his head, found Blackwall in the courtyard surrounded by children, distributing the wooden toys he’d made. Lavellan smiled. He pocketed the incomplete pendant and his carving knives and made his way down.

By the time Lavellan got there, the children were already running off with their new toys while Blackwall waved them goodbye.

Blackwall dusted his hands off and nodded at Lavellan’s approach.

“Inquisitor,” he greeted.

“The children seem happy today.”

He chuckled warmly and watched them go with a fond light in his eyes. “Just doing my part. They’re overwhelmed and scared enough about everything that’s been happening. Thought I’d give them something they can be happy about.”

“It’s good, what you’re doing. Thank you for this.”

Blackwall smiled, but that smile faltered as something troubled crossed his expression. A foreboding feeling settled in Lavellan’s gut.

“Want a drink?” asked Blackwall. “I’ve a hankering for company.”

Lavellan looked out at the children again. Blackwall *was* in the habit of giving out handmade gifts to the children but...

"You don't usually give them out in large batches," said Lavellan.

Blackwall didn't answer and headed for the tavern instead, leaving Lavellan with no choice but to follow.

"What do you feel like drinking?" asked Blackwall. "My shout."

Lavellan eyed him, suspicion brewing. "I'm feeling Rivaini ale."

His suspicions were proven right when Blackwall told him about the dog.

"There's always some dog out there," said Blackwall. "Some fucking mongrel that doesn't know how to stay away."

Lavellan stared down at his drink. "If you think about it, supposed heroes are the mongrels." He traced the rim of his tankard. "Always involving themselves. They get strung up for their efforts."

He was pretty sure he heard the bartender muttering, "Well this is depressing," down at the tankards he was wiping.

Bull and the Chargers eventually joined them for a round or ten of drinks, but Blackwall and Lavellan didn't drink any more. They both knew they'd need to be sober for the morning.

And so, the night passed, and morning came.

Lavellan returned to the stables just after dawn.

Blackwall was gone.

There was a letter pinned to the rocking griffon that Blackwall had finished carving. Lavellan's phoenix carving was resting beneath the letter. He picked the phoenix up with a heavy heart and read the message.

I'm sorry I couldn't be the man you believed me to be, said the concluding lines. It's been my honour to serve you. Please pass my apology on to Warden Stroud as well.

Lavellan folded the letter, tucked it in his pocket along with the carving, and rushed to the rookery.

Leliana was conversing with one of her agents, reading over a crumpled sheet of paper. She looked at him once he arrived, unsurprised to see him.

"This was missing from last week's reports," said Leliana. "It says there is to be an execution for those responsible for the Callier Massacre. Judging by your look, I assume you know what's going on more than I do."

"It was a hunch," he lied.

"Then I'll leave this matter to you. You know what to do next?"

He nodded.

She smiled wryly. "Ride swift," she bid.

Lavellan took Varric, Solas, and Bull (he'd chosen them for moral support more than anything), and they raced to Royeaux, changing horses at each town if only to cut back on time.

They reached the bridge to Val Royeaux and Lavellan all but jumped off his horse, sprinting over the bridge, the light summer drizzle pricking at his cheeks. They entered the summer bazaar where a sizeable crowd had gathered before the gallows.

A man stood defeated on the gallows, a noose resting around his neck. The bailiff read out the charges. Lavellan searched the crowd frantically—

“Stop!” called Blackwall, rushing up the gallows. “This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him.” He faced the crowd. “Orders were given, and he followed them like any good soldier.”

“Oh shit,” said Varric.

“Then find me the man who gave the order,” said the bailiff.

Lavellan could only watch with his heart in his throat, unable to say anything.

“I gave the order. The crime is mine.” Blackwall squared his shoulders, a man ready to stare death in the eye. “I am Thom Rainier.”

The crowd gasped. Bull made a surprised sound.

Blackwall and Lavellan's gazes met briefly, but Blackwall turned his head away in shame.

The guards took Blackwall away and the crowd jeered as he left, but the rain began to bucket down and forced everyone to disperse and seek shelter. Lavellan made his way to the bailiff, pulling his hood down for recognisability, and the bailiff straightened at his approach.

“Inquisitor Lavellan,” the bailiff hailed, saluting.

“Where are they taking him?” he asked.

“The jail off the old marketplace. If you've goodbyes to say, Inquisitor, say them now. Many want to watch that man swing.”

Lavellan swept his wet hair back and out of his face, and turned to his companions. “I'm going to go see him. Is anyone coming?”

“I'm going to end up punching him,” said Bull. “And they're going to have to drag me away for public disruption.”

“I need to sit down,” said Varric.

Solas eyed Lavellan. “You knew.”

Lavellan sighed. “I did some digging,” he lied again.

“I knew something didn't add up right,” muttered Bull, “but I wasn't expecting this. If you knew, why'd you keep him around?”

He smiled dryly at Bull. “I guess your nickname stuck for a reason.”

Bull made a soft noise. “Mercy, huh?”

Lavellan glanced at the old marketplace's general direction. "If you think you're going to end up punching Blackwall—"

"He's not Blackwall," said Bull.

Silence descended over them like the swift fall of an executioner's blade.

"If you think you're going to end up punching Rainier," Lavellan amended, "go wait at the bazaar café."

"I will come with you," said Solas.

He nodded. "Alright."

Bull and Varric left, and night had fallen by the time Lavellan and Solas found the prison. The Orlesian guards nodded at their arrival and directed them down a narrow, claustrophobic corridor lined with empty cells. Torchlight flickered over the dark stones, dancing to the rhythm of the faint patter of rain. A single swathe of dim light entered through the high and small barred windows of the corridor.

Lavellan stopped at the final cell. Black— *Rainier* was sitting on the cot with his head bowed. Solas stayed in a corner, regarding Rainier with a look that you'd give a stray, limping dog.

For a while, there was only silence. Lavellan felt an uncomfortable droplet of water slide down his back from his hair.

"I didn't take Blackwall's life," said Rainier, finally breaking the silence. "I traded his death. He wanted me to be a Warden, but the darkspawn ambushed us and killed him. I took his name to stop the world from losing a good man." He shook his head. "But the man he *was* wouldn't have let another die in his place."

Lavellan looked out the window. He'd left Blackwall— Rainier here last time. Had thought that this would be Rainier's atonement to make. The one good deed he could do.

How mistaken Lavellan had been. This was no good deed; this was a waste.

"So what?" asked Lavellan. "You die and think it will all make up for it?"

"It's a start." He looked up at Lavellan, the shadows of the bars superimposed over his face. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted answers," said Lavellan. "And because you're my friend."

Rainier's expression twisted and he stood, gripped the bars and rattled them. He gnashed his teeth. "You're friends with a *murderer*, a traitor, a monster. This is the truth; this is who I am. I am not, and never was, the good man you thought me to be. I gave the orders to kill Lord Callier and his family and I never told my men the truth, and when it came to light, I *ran*." He fell to his knees, as if he couldn't hold himself up. He laid his forehead on the bars "My men paid for treason while I played make-believe."

"A monster would have kept running, wouldn't have tried to make amends, wouldn't have felt remorse. I know monsters, Rainier. I've looked them in the eye." Lavellan crouched but Rainier wouldn't raise his head. "You're not one of them."

He said nothing. The rain abated outside.

Lavellan stood and stared at the top of Rainier's bowed head.

"Goodbye, Blackwall," said Lavellan, then left.

The letter arrived days later at Skyhold informing them of Rainier's death.

Sera wailed.

He walked away, steps determined, and Solas walked beside him. They left the prison. The rain had stopped, petrichor filling their noses, the slick stones reflecting the orange light of the gas lamps.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Solas.

"I plan to make him atone properly."

"We need to get Rainier out of Orlesian custody," he told his advisors.

"You have connections within the underworld..." started Leliana. Lavellan clenched his fists. No, Rainier would hate that. She took his reaction as a rejection. "Or we could find a decoy, similar build and appearance, have him take—"

"No," said Lavellan. "That's worse."

"We could storm the prison, take it by force," suggested Cullen.

"Just as bad and will jeopardise our political connections." Lavellan gnawed at his lip, the skin raw from being picked at and bitten. He hung his head.

"I can do it," came Josephine's soft voice. Lavellan raised his head. She wasn't holding her board today, but her hands were fisted above the table. "Request a... special dispensation from the Orlesian throne to transfer Thom Rainier into our custody. This may anger some, but we are owed favours after Halamshiral."

Lavellan frowned. "Jo, this will impact your reputation."

"Allow me," she said again, tone steely. Her fisted hands shook. "I want my answers."

The thick silence which followed was almost suffocating.

"Okay," he said gently. "Okay."

He sat on the throne. The Great Hall was crowded. His inner circle was in attendance, as well as all the people Rainier had touched as Blackwall.

The soldiers escorted Rainier across the Hall, the metal of his chains clanging. Lavellan gripped

the arm rest.

“Captain Thom Rainier,” Josephine presented, “formerly known to us as Warden Blackwall. His crimes...” She looked away. “Well, you know his crimes,” she said, an almost indiscernible waver in her voice. Rainier kept his head bowed. “It was no small expense to bring him here, but the decision of his fate is now up to you.”

By this time in the previous timeline, Blackwall had already died.

Well, in a way, Blackwall was already dead.

Lavellan said nothing for a long time, couldn't find the words. Rainier chuckled mirthlessly at his silence.

“Having regrets?” Rainier asked. “How did you get me here?”

“Josephine called in a few favours,” said Lavellan.

“And what happens to the reputation the ambassador has so carefully cultivated?”

“She insisted she be the one to get you into Inquisition custody.”

Rainier finally looked up, fixing Josephine a disbelieving and despairing look. She wouldn't meet his eyes. Rainier bowed his head again, expression pained.

“Now the world will know how you used your influence,” Rainier mocked. “They'll know the Inquisition is corrupt.”

“Believe me when I say the alternatives were worse.” He let go of the arm rests, clasped his hands over his lap instead.

“Why am I here?” Blackwall asked again, nigh begging. “I was ready to die and atone for my mistakes.”

“Because I never fault anybody for trying,” said Lavellan.

“I *murdered* children.”

“And now you spend every spare moment making children toys, giving them simple joy.”

He laughed derisively. “Oh, being a toymaker absolves me of all my crimes?”

“No, but it tells me that you feel remorseful, that not a single second goes by where you're not being gutted by what you've done. You may have pretended to be Blackwall, but the good things you did as him weren't false. You think dying will make up for everything?” Lavellan huffed out an abrupt and torn laugh. “Rainier, living hurts far more. Living will be constant atonement.”

The crowd shifted, sharing uncertain looks with one another.

“Thom Rainier,” continued Lavellan, “I sentence you to be the man Blackwall believed you could be.”

Murmurs swept through the crowd. Rainier stared up at him, eyes wide.

“After Corypheus is dealt with, you will also complete your Joining. For now, the Inquisition needs you.” Lavellan's gaze softened. “And if you survive the Joining, I sentence you to spend every

waking moment knowing what you've done, and striving to be better, striving to be another force of good in the world."

The murmurs grew in volume. Rainier scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head, falling to his knees, chains rattling.

"Why?" he asked, broken. Josephine turned her head away, lips pressing. Lavellan's heart pulled. Seeing Rainier's bowed and crumpled form battered at the foundations of Lavellan's anchors.

Stand up, stand up, I looked up to you. Stand.

Lavellan pushed himself off the throne and descended the steps. The murmurs grew even louder.

Rainier looked up. Lavellan reached into his pockets and crouched so they were eye-level and pulled out the phoenix carving. He offered it to Rainier whose expression crumbled further at the sight of it.

"I told you to look up before," said Lavellan. "I told you to look at this when you waver or question yourself. I told you I believed in you, and I still do, so for fuck's sake Blackwall— Rainier— Fuck. Just—" Lavellan forced himself to take a composing breath. He grabbed Rainier's hand and pressed the phoenix into it, made Rainier close his fingers around it.

"I do not deserve this," Rainier whispered.

"Then make yourself deserve it," Lavellan snapped, and shoved Rainier's hand into his chest. The chains rattled again. Lavellan stood and held out his hand. Rainier stared at it.

He took Lavellan's hand.

Lavellan pulled him up.

Rainier cradled the phoenix close and bowed his head again.

"I told you to look up," said Lavellan.

He took a shuddering breath, then he raised his head. Lavellan nodded at him.

"If I live," promised Rainier, "I'll make it count."

"You're already making it count," said Lavellan. "Just continue."

Chapter End Notes

The beginning sequence with the Orlesian scholars' protest is a nod to Merrowblueart and Mijura as thanks for the lovely package present they sent me <3 Thank you both so much <33

I honestly had a hard time during Blackwall's personal quest, ouch.

Cassandra: secrets bad

Lavellan: if secrets bad, why am i sexy

But yeah, jokes aside, a whole part of the reason why there's literally no surviving text

about Ras is because he purposefully had them destroyed. Which, coupled with the fact that his faces literally change and he does occasional switcheroos with the El'amelan using his cloak, makes him really hard to track. Poor Hanon, lmao.

Anyway, brace yourselves. Next week's gonna be interesting ;)

A small sip of knowledge

Chapter Notes

Not proofread. In fact, the past 5 or so chapters haven't been proofread lmao. It's back to just me because my beta is busy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

staring into greater depths

Walking along the battlements of Skyhold wasn't something Lavellan had done in a while, but he needed a calming activity that would distract him from his problems. Otherwise, he'd end up holding a conversation with the Well of Sorrows. That was a fruitless endeavour ninety-nine percent of the time (if it deigned to respond) because the conversation would always go something like this:

[“On'tarasyldear min'vir.^{\[1\]}”](#)

[Ma ane tel'uth, i melava vys var ove mar miren. Ma tel nua?^{\[2\]}](#)

[“Ma syn ra ga'melava.^{\[3\]}”](#)

So... yes, walking it was.

He passed through one of the watch towers and was about to exit out the other end—

“—assumed we were alike. We'd seen war, knew its terrible costs, but understood that it was necessary.”

Lavellan stopped short at Solas' voice. Strange, Solas didn't frequent these areas.

“But there was nothing necessary in what you did,” Solas continued. “You did not survive death and destruction. You sowed them. To feed your own desires.”

“Oh, that's his angry voice,” Lavellan whispered to himself. Who was the poor sod at the end of his ire?

“I know that.”

Rainier.

“I see it every time I look in a mirror,” said Rainier. “I try to make up for it.”

“By wearing another skin. You ran away rather than face what you had done. You are wasting your time.”

Lavellan pursed his lips and grimaced. A deadly silence followed. He chose that moment to open the door and make his presence known, the chilly wind displacing the quiet warmth of the watch tower.

Rainier and Solas looked at him before Solas crossed his arms and stared out over the battlements, his displeasure writ on his face. Lavellan shot Rainier a gentle, meaningful look and subtly tipped his head towards the nearby staircase. Rainier nodded and retreated, shamed.

Once he was gone, Lavellan and Solas were left in a heavy silence, accented with the wind's soft howling.

Lavellan let out a heavy breath and stood beside Solas, leaning on the crenelation of the battlements and looking out at the expanse of the Frostbacks.

"Why did you not tell anyone about Blackwall?" asked Solas. "You knew who he was."

"It wasn't my truth to give. And I didn't know he was Thom Rainier. Just that he wasn't really Blackwall."

"Yet you still pardoned him, even after you learned of his crimes."

"If it were up to you, what would you have done?" asked Lavellan.

"I would have killed him myself."

"Would you?"

Solas said nothing.

"Is there a crime so severe that you would never pardon it?" Solas asked instead. "If a man were responsible for the death of millions, would you still offer him your hand? Would you tell him to rise? Would you still hold his bloodstained hands?"

"You know I don't just pardon people arbitrarily," said Lavellan. "Tell me. When do I offer them mercy? Think back through all of my judgements, all of my choices. Tell me."

Solas paused in thought, but he didn't take long to answer. "When they express remorse and wish to do better."

"Yes. What else?"

He paused again, longer this time. Another gust of chilly wind passed and Lavellan resecured the Dalish scarf around his neck.

"When they have lost hope," Solas murmured, "and have accepted their death as an inevitability. As the only solution." He bowed his head slightly, staring at the stone of the battlements.

Lavellan smiled softly and offered Solas his hand. Solas stared at it.

"Come," said Lavellan. "I have some free time. Do you want to resume the Dalish lessons?"

"You are ridiculous," he said, but took Lavellan's hand anyway.

Lavellan grinned. "No, I'm the Inquisitor."

Solas took his hand out of Lavellan's and walked away. Lavellan laughed and called out for him to come back.

“You’re splitting.”

Lavellan flipped the page of his book. “Good morning, Cole.”

The gardens held nary a soul during the early hours of the morning, occupied only by the most pious of sisters in quiet meditation of the Chant or the early risers who had made it a habit to roam the gardens after waking.

Cole perched himself on the back of the bench, feet on the armrests. Lavellan closed the book and angled his head to better face Cole.

“You don’t know where to stand,” continued Cole. “Feet over two stones spreading and splitting but you don’t think you’re one or the other. But there’s no bridge to stand on. It gets wider. You split more.” He frowned at Lavellan in concern. “You need a bridge.”

Lavellan looked down at the book in his lap. It was a tome written entirely in Elvish, one of the books he’d borrowed from Morrigan. It held no consequential information, just a collection of tales from pilgrims. It was Elvish practice for Morrigan more than anything else.

“How does one go about building a bridge?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Cole wrung his fingers. “I don’t know how to help.”

“That’s silly,” chirped a familiar voice, “you can’t be the bridge for him.”

They turned and found Kieran standing behind them with a book clutched to his chest.

“It’s because you’re not standing there,” Kieran continued. “And you shouldn’t be. He makes it himself.”

“But where should I stand?” asked Cole.

“Anywhere you can catch him.”

Sandwiched between a cryptic conversation wasn’t how Lavellan had expected this morning to go.

“But it’s alright,” said Kieran. “He’ll get what he needs for the bridge soon.”

“What a lovely morning,” sighed Lavellan. “Here I thought I’d have to start the day without anything confusing.”

One of the doors burst open and startled a nearby Sister.

“Oh! There it is,” said Kieran.

Ellana came barrelling towards him, eyes frantic, hair like a bird’s nest. As if she’d just woken up. Lavellan didn’t get the chance to ask or even greet her because she yanked him up by the arm and dragged him away.

“Um, bye!” he called out to Cole and Kieran and tripped over his feet trying to right himself and keep up with Ellana. “Hey, whoa, what’s the hurry?”

“I did it,” she whispered, her grip on his arm bruising. She dragged him to her room and slammed the door shut. He eyed the space. Already lived-in. Books and papers were scattered haphazardly,

empty tankards littered the place, and her bed had books and clothes piled atop it. He almost tripped over her bedroll.

“Just because you don’t use the bed doesn’t mean you can use it as a table,” he said.

“Then it’s just useless otherwise. But it’ll be very useful today.” She grabbed armfuls of the clothes on the bed and dumped them on the floor and relocated the books. “We’re going to the Fade.”

He frowned at her. “You made contact with Knowledge?”

“I did,” she said, breathless. “And I asked questions, but it said it would be better if you were there to hear the answers and I agreed. No time to waste!”

His mouth dried. “Again, why the hurry?”

“You’re really going to make a spirit wait on you? Rude!”

“Are you sure it’s Knowledge? Not Pride or Envy or Guile?”

“Don’t worry, this was a lesson from the Dread Wolf.”

Lavellan laughed. “You know, most Dalish would find that the opposite of reassuring.”

“Just—” She sighed and patted his cheek. “Trust me. I would never put you in danger.”

“I don’t doubt that, but some spirits are tricky.”

She gripped his shoulders, looking him in the eye. “Trust me.”

Lavellan let out a soft huff and smiled at her, squeezing her hands on his shoulders. “Okay. What do I have to do?”

It was a garden library. Lavellan never would have put garden together with library, and yet, it made sense. Towering trees crowned with a curtain of hanging crystal leaves surrounded them, thick trunks doubling as shelves which were overflowing with scrolls and books. The pervasive smell of old pages and smoky wood curled softly in the air. It was night, but the sky was bright with dancing auroras.

They found the spirit swinging on a vine hanging from a branch.

“Hello,” greeted Ellana. “I’ve brought my brother.”

Knowledge slipped off the vine and drifted towards them, emanating the same warm orange light as the Archivist in the Vir Dirthara. Although, the Archivist had looked more solid. This spirit of Knowledge flickered like a flame shielded by a hand from a heavy wind.

“Greetings,” said the spirit, its voice like the burst of air you get from swiftly thumbing through the pages of a book.

Lavellan scrutinised the spirit and sensed that it was indeed Knowledge.

“It is rare to encounter a spirit of Change,” said Knowledge. “Rarer to find it physical. What great force led to your crossing?”

“A god, apparently,” muttered Lavellan.

“That is the first. What of the second?”

He shook his head. “A blank, unfortunately. The memories I receive are very sporadic. I was hoping you may have a few answers for us.”

“Many seek answers, but knowledge comes at a cost. For many, the cost is time. Others, pain. You have gained knowledge through pain. Yes, I see it. Lessons learned from hurt.”

Lavellan pressed his lips into a tight line and stared at his feet.

Knowledge tilted its head. “Yet lessons from love, too.”

“Are you saying we need to make a payment of sort for answers?” asked Ellana.

“Not to me. You have already paid. You are already paying. And you will continue to pay. The dispensation of knowledge does not stop at the initiation of learning. It is the unstoppable force of a raging river. You will keep knowing, even when you wish to stop knowing.”

Ellana laughed nervously. “Fantastic.”

Knowledge stared at Lavellan. “You come to me because you are stumbling along the dividing line.” It transferred its stare to Ellana. “You come to me because you do not want to see him fall.” It opened its arms. “Ask your questions. I cannot offer wisdom, but I can offer knowledge.”

Ellana nudged him. Lavellan shuffled hesitantly, uncertain of where to begin.

Knowledge hummed. “You do not wish to know,” it said.

“It— It’s not that. Or at least...” He sighed.

“Knowing itself is the price,” said Knowledge. “All weapons carry weight. You must choose what manner of weight you wish to carry.” It waved its hand and conjured two seats. “But the head carries enough. Let the feet rest.”

Lavellan smiled and gratefully sat.

“I would offer tea,” said Knowledge, “but it wouldn’t taste very nice. Or at all.”

“That’s very sweet of you to offer, regardless,” said Ellana.

“How much are you willing to answer?” Lavellan asked.

“Whatever I can. It has been a while since I have had guests.”

He smiled. “That’s a shame. Your realm is lovely.”

“Thank you,” said Knowledge. “Before we move on to your questions, is there any kind of background information you would wish to inform me of that will pertain to your questions?”

“Oh, there’s... quite a few,” he said. He glanced at Ellana in apprehension and she smiled in encouragement.

Lavellan took a deep breath, and gave Knowledge the summary of his role in Elvhenan, his hazy memories, his new life in the present era, and the time travel involved.

“I understand,” said Knowledge by the end of it. “What can I help you with?”

Lavellan looked down, sorting through all of the questions racing through his head.

“Fen’ Harel told me that something will end the world, but he refused to disclose what it was,” said Lavellan. “The Well said it was malice, but I take it that the Well had meant poison. I’m thinking of the poison the Evanuris had used against the Titans. Is that it?”

“Most likely,” said Knowledge.

“Do you know what it is?”

“No. That is one of the Evanuris’ most well-guarded secrets. No other denizen of the waking world or the Fade know of it. All I know of it is that it is a primordial magic, and that the Forgotten Ones are aware of what it is.”

So only Solas could answer him, after all. If not him, then Lavellan could, provided he retrieved the rest of his memories.

“Do you know how I can retrieve the rest of my memories?”

“It would depend on the circumstances of their loss.”

He laughed without humour. “This is going to be an absolute shock, but I don’t remember.”

“Do you at least know if it was self-inflicted or not?”

Lavellan paused. “Actually, Asunara and Imshael both implied that I’m the one who locked my own memories away.” For his own safety, Asunara had said. Safety from what?

“Ah, that is good news,” said Knowledge. “It means they are not lost. In fact, you may already have the means to unlock them. I would caution against this, though. What has Memory said about retrieving them all at once?”

“Not recommended.” He chewed on his lip. “I’m not saying I’ll definitely do it. But if I know how, then I can at least think about it and figure out where to go from there.”

Knowledge hummed and looked around, scanning its repertoire of books and scrolls. It held out its hands. A few books and scrolls glowed in their shelves, and orange tendrils of light flowed from the books to Knowledge, a stream of Elvish letters coiling around the tendrils.

“The Well of Sorrows,” said Knowledge. The tendrils and letters thinned and faded. It lowered its hands. “As you know, devoted and high-ranking supplicants would leave their knowledge within the Well before entering uthenera. This was to ensure that their knowledge would be secured and preserved, and that their knowledge can be inherited if need be in a controlled environment.”

Lavellan nodded. “And that Dirthamen helped Mythal devise the magic for it.”

“That knowledge is from a memory?”

“No, I... I just knew it.”

Knowledge looked up. “I see. You are correct. Unfortunately, I also do not know the exact

mechanisms of the vir'abelasan. Not even the Vir Dirthara holds the answers you seek. I only know that the Well holds the key to retrieving the rest of your memories. The Sentinels of Mythal's temple would have better insight."

"As frustrating as that is, it makes sense." He slumped in his seat.

Ellana gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and turned to Knowledge with a small frown. "Do you think his time travelling would have affected the Well?"

Oh, good question.

"Quite possibly," said Knowledge. "I would have expected the Well to return to its vessel within the Temple of Mythal. And yet, it has stayed with you. I do not know what implications this will have for its original vessel."

"The Well seems to have a limited degree of sentience," said Lavellan. "Do you think it could have chosen to stay with me?"

"Possibly."

Lavellan rubbed his face. This wasn't as enlightening as he'd hoped. He just had more questions.

"So it all comes back to the Well anyway," he said.

The trip to the Arbor Wilds and the Temple of Mythal was going to be interesting. Or horrifying. Lavellan didn't bet on which one it'd be. He already had terrible luck.

"What about questions regarding time travel?" he asked. "Are you equipped to answer them?"

"I believe so, yes."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "Asunara said the reversal of time revolved around me because of the Well's preservative magic and something about the Anchor. But I'm still not entirely clear on that. I haven't aged back, so I assume my physical body was preserved and somewhat healed because I don't have my wounds from the final fight." Lavellan raised his left arm. "And my arm came back."

"The reversal of time involved the reversal of the flow of magic. Since the Anchor had slowly turned your flesh into magical energy, the rewinding of time reverted that magical energy back into its previous state, which was flesh. Hence, your arm back." It tilted its head. "Also, you *have* de-aged. But to a lesser extent."

Lavellan frowned. "But I looked just as old when I first checked."

"Because you were still under immense emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual stress."

"Just— Just say stress."

Ellana clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her giggles. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's not funny, that's terrible, but— Shit. You were so stressed that you ended up looking older." She covered the rest of her face, shoulders shaking.

Lavellan ended up laughing with her.

"This is so stupid," he said between his laughs.

Knowledge waited patiently for them to regain their bearings. Ellana and Lavellan soon calmed down, and he wiped a tear from his eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Lavellan. "I feel like we came to you with all of the forbidden questions."

The impressions of Knowledge's face shifted into what could constitute as a smile. "Do not apologise. I had expected to be ill-equipped when I heard it would be you, but I can at least point you towards a path."

"Thank you. I could definitely do with more paths and less wandering in the ass end of nowhere right now." He tilted his head. "Do you know me?"

"Not personally, but I have heard of you. The Change spirit who gained physicality."

"You can sense I'm Change."

"Yes."

"Denizens from the Fade seem to be able to do that now, but nobody mentioned anything the first time."

"I suspect it may be because of the Veil's collapse. It may have reconnected you to the Fade for a while and reawakened an inherent part of you."

"Which could have restored some spirit-y things," said Ellana. "Doesn't Solas count as a spirit? Kind of. Maybe. Why can't he sense that Hanon's Change?"

It shook its head. "He *became* physical. His nature is different. Upon gaining physicality, the Elvhen lose the ability to instinctively sense what ideal a spirit is embodying and rely on auras instead."

"Then the Veil went up," said Lavellan.

"Precisely. The elves have lost this sense. The Dread Wolf is likely relying on his personal knowledge and inferences to determine what spirit he is interacting with."

Relieving, but simultaneously disappointing. He both wanted and didn't want Solas to figure it out.

"I don't actually know much about Change spirits," said Ellana. "I barely hear about them."

"Because we hate the waking world," said Lavellan. "We tend to keep to ourselves and mind our own business."

"They also hold dominion over one of the Fade's main forces," said Knowledge. "Change in the Fade is akin to gravity in the waking world. It is a fundamental part of this realm. As such, there is not much reason for them to seek their ideals elsewhere." Knowledge stared at Lavellan. "Not usually."

Ellana grinned. "Hanon really saw a man so impressive that he up and left his home, huh?"

He groaned. "Don't say it like that."

She sniggered.

"It is not so surprising that his devotion burned fiercely," said Knowledge. "Change spirits are more prone to experiencing intense emotions."

“Don’t spirits who experience intense emotions get corrupted?” asked Ellana.

Knowledge stayed quiet, and the question became the answer.

“Oh,” she said softly.

“That is also why they are rare. Most of them are susceptible to changing too much, or too little to overcompensate. They become Entropy, or Envy, respectively.”

Lavellan’s brows raised. Envy?

“But Envy demons are... a little bit more common.” Ellana looked down and again, whispered, “Oh.”

Lavellan leaned back in his seat. Entropy or Envy, huh? Although, he felt that Entropy was the one he was in most danger from. He could feel this... drive within him. The drive to keep gearing for change, to keep testing and prodding, to see how far he could bend something before it breaks.

He pursed his lips.

But how much was too much?

“Do you have any other queries?” asked Knowledge.

Lavellan clenched his hands over his thighs. “One last question. How do I meet up with Memory?”

“You will need a Dreamer’s help. Preferably one who is well-versed in contacting spirits. It helps that you know her name. That will differentiate her from other spirits of Memory.”

“She also has a large realm,” said Lavellan. “Might make things a little easier.”

“Maybe I can help you with that, too,” said Ellana. “Although I’ll probably have to ask Knowledge to teach me instead of Solas. Otherwise, it would invite way too many questions and he’s already —” she gave a vague gesture— “nosy.”

He smiled. “I hope you haven’t been giving him too much grief?”

“Only a healthy amount.” She turned to Knowledge. “Is that alright with you? For me to come back? Not just for lessons but... learning in general. Books can only take me so far.”

“Of course,” said Knowledge, a touch cheery. “I welcome visitors. My library is always open to you both.”

Ellana’s eyes lit up and she grinned. “Thank you.”

“If you ever find yourselves plagued with more questions that you think I can answer, I am happy to provide. You know how to find me now.”

Lavellan nodded. “Thank you very much, Knowledge. I’m sorry we came to you with such difficult questions. It’s just...”

“You did not know where to start, I understand. But this is how most things begin. You start with a large stack of books and resources, some helpful, some not, and you work forward and narrow it down from there.” It nodded. “I wish you the best of luck, Change.”

“Luck’s been terrible so far so I could definitely use some of that. Is there a spirit of Luck around

here?”

“They’re quite capricious. I would not recommend it.”

He chuckled. “Alright.”

“Are you ready to head back?” Ellana asked.

“For now. More Inquisitorial things to manage, you know how it is.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“You don’t have to wake with me,” he said. “I can tell you’re dying to stay and ask more questions. If Knowledge is amenable to this.”

Knowledge nodded. “Stay as long as you’d like.”

Ellana shot him a hesitant glance. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s not everyday you get to do this.” He ruffled her hair and she squawked. “I’m proud of you. You worked hard to do this, and for my sake too, so go treat yourself. Ask your questions.”

She whacked his hand away and huffed, but she was smiling. “Alright. I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said and smiled back. “Thanks, Lana.”

“Do you need me to wake you?”

“No, no, I got it. You learn to do these things when you want to walk out on your ex in the Fade.”

Ellana guffawed and Lavellan grinned. He closed his eyes and focused on his presence.

And pushed himself out.

Lavellan woke with a start, blinking at the ceiling for a few moments. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Ellana was still asleep beside him so he carefully navigated around her and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

He left her room and leaned against the closed door, covering his eyes.

Damn it all.

Chapter End Notes

Why'd you all get so scared when I said this week was going to be interesting? I really just meant interesting. Look at this interesting information! :D

Lmao, poor Knowledge though. Imagine a secret service agent rocking up to a librarian and asking about highly classified government information

Lavellan: can you tell me about this super top secret that only the gods know
Knowledge: sir this is a library

Translation

[1] **On'tarasyldear min'vir:** Nice weather today. [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ma ane tel'uth, i melava vys var ove mar miren. Ma tel nua?:** You are mortal, and time is slipping through your fingers. Do you not ache? [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Ma syn ra ga'melava:** You do this every time. [\[↑\]](#)

There once was a man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

who made mistake after mistake

“Something troubling you?”

Lavellan looked up from the tiger pendant he was carving. Blackw— Rainier ascended the ladder to the barn loft and Lavellan scooted over to make space, displacing the needles of hay beneath him as he did. He set the pendant and his carving knife down on his lap.

“What makes you say that?” asked Lavellan.

“You were humming,” said Black— Fuck, *Rainier*. “That song. Solas said it was your mother’s lullaby.”

“Oh, I— Yeah, it is.”

Rainier sat beside him and smiled. The phoenix carving was now a necklace hanging around his neck, proudly displayed. Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat.

He went back to carving the tiger pendant. “Doesn’t mean I’m troubled though. I just do it to fill the silence.”

“You also seem down.” Rainier made himself comfortable, the wood creaking beneath them as he moved. “Need an ear? I’ll listen. I can also leave if you want to be alone.”

Lavellan paused. “No,” he said, voice small. “Stay, please.”

Rainier nodded. “What’s troubling you?”

“I— A lot,” he laughed. His laughter softened into a smile, then faded. He played with the handle of his knife. “I don’t know who I am sometimes. Different lives smashing together to make a mess. I was a real piece of shit before, you know? Ordered people to die. I was so angry and hurt. I ignored my friends, didn’t treat them well or value them properly.”

Lavellan’s response was vague and invited questions, but Rainier didn’t ask, only listened with a patient look that encouraged him to continue.

“And before that, I was the one doing the killing. Trying to protect by striking first. I have so much blood on my hands. It’s hard to reconcile who I was and who I am now.” He brushed the wood shavings off his lap and sighed. “Sorry. Don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Sometimes the truth becomes so heavy that you want to share it with someone.” Rainier twisted a few needles of hay between his fingers. “And I know a thing or two about horrible pasts. A lot of people here do. But you gave them a chance to do better, to be better than they were.”

“Because you all recognised that what you did was wrong and wanted to be better.”

“So do you. You know it was wrong. Be as merciful to yourself as you are to others.”

Lavellan stared at the carving, didn't say anything.

"Whoever you were before," continued Rainier, "you know what he did was wrong. That matters. It means you've changed."

Lavellan snorted, then laughed.

Rainier raised a brow and smiled. "Something I said?" he asked.

"A little bit," said Lavellan. "Change, huh?" He traced the rough outline of the tiger pendant. It was the profile of a stylised tiger head, its neck morphing into a coil of vines and flowers. "What if I'm tired of changing?"

"We always change. It's part of being alive."

"I could change into someone terrible again."

"Maybe," said Rainier. "But you could also change into someone better. Best thing you can do is always try to do right by others and yourself." He clasped Lavellan's shoulder. "I know you're a good man, and you try to keep being one. That's the best anyone can ask for."

Lavellan smiled at him. "Had an enlightening week?"

Rainier gave a hearty laugh. "That's one way to put it." He patted Lavellan's shoulder. "But I do mean it, Inquisitor. The world tried to make a monster out of you, but you said no. That matters. It's harder to fight against it, and it's tiring, but you keep going. That matters."

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Would you like a hug?"

"Yes, please."

Rainier's hugs were solid and big and encompassing and Lavellan relaxed into it and his puffy coat, smelling hay, sword oil, smoke, and wood. It reminded him of the old Warleader's hugs.

"Solas said the Dalish are physically affectionate," said Rainier. "That it's how they connect with others, and it's comforting for them. Sorry if we've been a little remiss with that. You find yourself needing a hug, I'm for it. No questions asked."

"Blackwall's Hugging Stall," Lavellan snorted. "Wait, sorry. Rainier. Blackwall? Blackrain. Rainwall."

He groaned and Lavellan stepped back with a cheeky grin.

"Bull's bothered me about that already," said Rainier.

"Bull? Last I heard, he wanted to punch you."

"The man's the definition of live and let live. Got snarked at a little then we hit the bottles and now we're all good apparently."

He chuckled. "That does sound like him." He recalled Rainier's slight altercation with Solas the other week and frowned. "How are the others treating you?"

"As well as you'd expect," said Rainier. "Most folks hate me but... A few are still trying to talk to

me.” He smiled, eyes shimmering. “I’m grateful. That’s already more than I deserve.”

Lavellan’s eyes softened. “And Josephine?”

He said nothing.

“Give them time,” Lavellan assured. *Give her time.*

“It’s fine if they don’t forgive me. They’re entitled to their anger.” He crossed his arms and looked off into the distance. “As for the name... I’d prefer it if you keep calling me Blackwall. It’s not what you’re thinking. I’m not trying to keep running.”

“I never thought that. Let me guess, use it as a title? Like Inquisitor.”

“I—” He blinked at Lavellan. “Yes. How did you—?”

Lavellan looked up at the barn’s rafters. “I did the same before. So did the man I loved.”

“Can I ask what happened to him?”

He smiled. “I killed him.”

“Ah.”

It was quiet again for a while.

“I can hear your head screaming from curiosity,” said Lavellan.

“Not my place to pry. But I’ll listen if you want to tell me.”

He hugged Blackwall again, squeezing as tight as he could to convey the extent of his gratitude.

Lavellan stared at the troop movement plans arrayed in front of him, head buried in his hands. The preparations for the Arbor Wilds were coming to a head. They would be more than ready to march against Corypheus next month.

A month and a half left.

And in a few days, it would mark one year since the Inquisition was born, one year since he was sent back to this hell.

One year.

He looked at the rotunda murals instead because that was at least less infuriating than thinking about the passage of time and battle strategy.

Someone placed a steaming cup of something in front of him. Lavellan frowned at it.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Prophet’s laurel tea,” said Solas. “Boiled with cinnamon and cardamom, I believe. I added milk and an obscene amount of honey, accounting for your sweet tooth.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“Remind me how long the box of macarons lasted?”

Lavellan took a grumpy sip.

“My point stands,” said Solas with a small smile.

Lavellan hummed in surprise at the taste. “Oh, this is nice, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said warmly, and a small lull settled between them.

Solas turned his head and stared at his murals, his gaze turning distant. Lavellan took another sip and stared at Solas over the rim of the cup. He seemed... distracted.

“I wish to go to a village just east of Crestwood,” Solas said. “There is a small bookshop selling a rare book there. I had sent a request to purchase it, and I recently received a letter confirming that they have it ready for me to retrieve.”

“Ah, is that what the tea was for?” teased Lavellan. “Buttering me up? You know I’d grant you leave with good enough reason.”

He didn’t respond.

The first hints of unease curled in Lavellan’s stomach.

Solas looked back at him, something unidentifiable in his gaze. “Come with me,” he said.

Lavellan’s brows raised at the unyielding tone of his voice. “Is there a question mark at the end of that sentence?” he joked. “Or is that an order?”

Solas finally smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Merely an offer. One you are free to leave or take.”

He searched Solas’ eyes but they gave nothing away. Lavellan frowned, glanced down at the military plans, then back at Solas.

“Okay,” he said. “Let me just arrange a few things with my advisors.”

Solas clasped his hands behind his back and nodded. “Of course.” He looked away again. “I will... prepare my things. I will meet you at the stables tomorrow mid-morning.”

Lavellan watched him go, his frown deepening.

Solas’ strange behaviour plagued him for the rest of the day, but he tried to put it out of his mind and made arrangements with his advisors during the War Council. Afterwards, he made his way back to his quarters to pack and bumped into Ellana on the way. She tagged along, speaking of the things she’d learned from Knowledge. She’d been overflowing with information ever since they’d contacted Knowledge last week.

Once she finished, he began packing. Ellana sat on the arm of the couch and swung her legs.

“Are you heading off?” she asked.

“Yeah, with Solas.” He brushed his hair out of his face. Getting longer. “He was acting strange when he asked me to come with him.”

“Strange how?”

“I don’t know. Guarded? Apprehensive? Do you know what’s going on?”

“Not really. We haven’t had lessons because I was talking to Knowledge, and I haven’t seen him skulking around your dreams either.”

“He skulks around my dreams?”

“Occasionally. Guarding you, I think.”

“I— Oh.”

Ellana frowned at him. “You still remember what I taught you about dreams and people’s boundaries, right?”

“I think I have the gist of it, yes. When people dream, they make a space for themselves in the Fade. The boundary of this space can’t be easily crossed by spirits or demons.”

She nodded. “Mages have weak boundaries, and Dreamers have none. The boundaries also give out different feelings depending on what people are dreaming about or the personality of the dreamer.”

“You mentioned before that my boundary’s always been weak.”

“But it’s always felt very stubborn. It’s why you don’t get a lot of demons or spirits trying to barge in.”

He snorted and turned back to packing. “Tell that to Solas.”

“Oh, I tried.” She chuckled, but her mirth faded fast and her tone grew concerned. “Hanon, your boundary’s getting weaker.”

Lavellan paused.

“I think it’s why you’re getting clearer dreams and why you can control them.”

“That’s because of the Anchor then. I had that too, last time. I lost that clarity when Solas took the Anchor.” Then again, he’d never been able to get much sleep after, so it hadn’t really mattered.

“It’s also fluctuating,” she said.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Neither do I. I’ll ask Knowledge later.”

Lavellan recalled Sera’s words a few weeks ago and frowned. “Do I feel different? The Veil around me, I mean.”

“It does, but I wasn’t sure if that’s a result of the Anchor or not.”

Right, she did come a bit later so she couldn’t have known if something about him had changed over time.

“Sera’s noted that the Veil feels strange around me,” he said. “Not just around the Anchor. It also feels different, apparently.”

Come to think of it, Revasha had also mentioned that he felt weird. Could elves sense it then? It would make sense. They *were* more sensitive to the Veil.

Ellana was quiet for a moment, scrutinising him.

“Huh,” she said. “She’s right.”

“Solas hasn’t mentioned it.”

“Well, that’s worrying,” she mumbled. He snorted in agreement. What the hell was Solas thinking? And what was with him and this trip?

Lavellan stopped. Was Solas planning to confront him about it?

He forced himself to calm down. No. It wouldn’t do him any good to jump to conclusions right now. Maybe the book had sentimental value and he wanted moral support. It could be any number of reasons.

“He was there the night you dreamt of Dirthamen,” Ellana murmured and he tensed. “I was trying to stop him from entering your dream. Your boundary was... He was worried. He said he could feel dark and ancient forces in your dream. Then your boundary suddenly released this wave of incredible sorrow. Knocked the wind out of me when I felt it. Then you woke up.”

His heart thundered and he clutched at his chest. He wasn’t sure if his heart was pacing from Solas’ almost-discovery or the memories of that dream. Maybe both.

“Hanon, you weren’t really clear on it,” said Ellana. “What was Dirthamen to you?”

“Does it matter?” he asked, heart clenching.

“Do you even know?”

“I—”

“My brother is fond of you,” says Falon’Din. “You know that, right?”

It isn’t a rhetorical question.

“I am of use to him and I do my job well,” Lavellan answers. “I suppose that would earn some of his favour.”

“I cannot tell,” he says, “if you’re playing daft to protect him, or if you really are daft.”

Lavellan keeps his expression and aura stoic.

“Let me be blunt. Are you lovers?”

The question blindsides him. Centuries of experience with thinking on his feet, and yet this is the question that stuns him.

Falon’Din stares at him, waiting.

“I wouldn’t presume,” Lavellan finally answers.

Falon'Din's eyes spark and he smiles again, head tilting in intrigue. "Interesting. That's not a no."

"It's not a yes."

"Hanon?"

Lavellan shook his head, the void within him surging once more, burning him from the inside. He rubbed his eyes.

"Sorry," he said. "What were you asking?"

Ellana stared at him with a small frown, but that frown slowly faded into a soft look that he couldn't decipher.

"Never mind," she said, her tone lightening.

"Promise me," says Lavellan.

"I promise," says Dirthamen.

Lavellan jerked back, breaths rapid.

"Everything okay?" asked Ellana, already walking over to him and kneeling beside him.

He covered his face. "A duckling tried to jump out but it got scared and huddled back."

She gave him a befuddled look. "What?"

"Ducklings," he said and cursed Imshael out, if only because he needed something to get angry at.

Solas' odd behaviour persisted during the trip. They rode through the countryside in an uneasy quiet, a strange focus in Solas' eyes. Hell, what kind of book were they off to get? Lavellan was already anxious enough and this wasn't helping.

When they stopped to make camp, they were at least able to keep up an amiable conversation and Lavellan could forget about his worries for a while. He tried playing mind chess with Solas but failed. They drew a chessboard into the soil instead and set up random stones and twigs as pieces, but they had to stop because Vergala kept stealing the pieces.

The next morning, they continued. As they passed Crestwood, the clouds rolled in, thick and grey, heralding rain.

"We're almost there," Solas reassured.

True to his word, they reached the village in about half an hour. It was a quaint lakeside village,

almost the size of a town but not quite, with an even mix of elven and human inhabitants. The village was a little more remote, so as long as Lavellan kept his hood up, he wouldn't be recognised.

They dropped their horses off at the inn's stables while Vergala flew off to explore the village. Lavellan followed Solas into a shop showcasing its books behind the windows, the space inside small and intimate with orderly shelves and a few potted plants hanging from the rafters. An elderly elf behind the counter looked up and smiled.

"Andaran atish'an," she greeted. "You are Solas?"

Solas nodded and smiled back. "Yes."

While the two conversed, Lavellan wandered the small shop, stopping to read a children's book with cute illustrations. Once he finished, he returned to Solas just in time to see the shopkeeper gently hand over a thin box. The book must be inside.

"It is a little delicate," she said. "I suggest returning it to the case after you read it, if only to preserve it. I've included a set of instructions on how to store it properly."

"Thank you very much," said Solas. "Parting with it must have been difficult."

She waved him off. "The book deserves to be read by one who can understand it fully. I can read and understand only a certain extent, but despite this limitation, I know it to be beautiful. Its full beauty deserves to be appreciated."

"Thank you," Solas said again, softer this time. "If you'd like, I could give you the translation."

"No," she said and smiled. "I have felt it. It is enough. Now, it moves on to a new home with a reader who can cherish it and its words."

"I am gladdened to hear that it was still able to give you joy." Solas bowed his head. "Good afternoon." He turned to Lavellan and smiled. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Thunder rumbled outside. "Though we should get a room in the inn before the rain drenches us. Here, I can tuck the box under my cloak so that it doesn't get wet."

Solas passed him the box and Lavellan wrapped it gently. They thanked the elderly shopkeeper and raced back to the inn to avoid the increasing drops of rain. They paid for a room, had supper, then retreated to their room. The fireplace had already been lit.

"Did you get wet?" asked Lavellan. He passed the (thankfully still dry) box back to Solas.

"Somewhat, but it is of no concern." He took the box and gingerly set it down on the bedside table, then waved his hand and dried themselves with magic.

Lavellan curled up on the bay window and watched the droplet-ridden view of the village and lake beyond. Vergala settled on the rafters where she shook water off herself.

"You've been mysterious about this book so far," said Lavellan. "What is it about?"

"It... This may be a little silly of me." Solas picked up the box and approached. Lavellan tucked his legs to his chest to make room and Solas sat cross-legged across him. He opened the box and took out the book within. It was thinner than Lavellan had expected.

Solas stared at the cover with a wistful shimmer in his eyes. He smiled and handed it to Lavellan.

Lavellan took the book and blinked at the front cover. The soft leather was dyed a deep blue, faded now, as were the curlicues engraved into the leather of the book. But the calligraphic title still gleamed silver. It was written in Elvish.

The Collected Poems of Lathanir.

“How well can you read Elvish?” asked Solas.

“I’m not too fluent,” he lied, “but I can manage.”

Lavellan pretended to puzzle over the title for show, but made sure not to overdo it. He nodded after a few seconds.

“A poetry book,” he said and smiled at Solas. “Tell me about it?”

“Lathanir is an ancient elven poet and playwright,” said Solas. “This book has managed to survive the fall of Elvhenan. It is possibly the only one left.”

“Holy shit,” murmured Lavellan.

Solas chuckled. “Indeed.”

Lathanir... Why was that name familiar?

“Will you come see a play with me?”

Lavellan frowns. “Why...?”

“I would like to get to know you better,” says Solas.

“I thought you were eager for us to finally part ways. Mission accomplished, no more obligations on your end. This is rather counterproductive.”

“I realise I have misjudged you. I would like to try again, if you are willing.”

“Through a play.”

“It was but a suggestion. I am amenable to any alternatives.”

“Would you be amenable to no?” asks Lavellan.

“What do you take me for? Of course.”

Lavellan scrutinises him, wary, waiting for a hidden punchline. But Solas’ aura only pulses with soft sincerity.

What’s the harm? They can try again. It doesn’t matter either way if they end up on better terms or not. And if Dirthamen’s fond of Solas then there must be something that he sees in him. Whatever it is.

“What play?” Lavellan asks.

Solas smiles. “Song of Spring. Lathanir.”

Lavellan laughs. "Of course you'd choose her. The rebel of the creative domain, pushing the boundaries of centuries' worth of traditional metre."

"I thought you might appreciate it. As someone who pushes boundaries themselves."

He tentatively returns Solas' smile. "Alright, Wolf. Let's try this friendship thing."

Five years later, Lathanir releases another play. Solas asks Lavellan to see it with him.

Lavellan says yes.

Solas asks again for the next play.

Lavellan says yes.

Lavellan asks him for the next play.

Solas says yes.

Lavellan opened the book gently.

"A favourite of yours?" asked Lavellan.

Solas smiled and nodded.

Lathanir's works had given them some common ground. It had become one of their first shared interests, and indeed, it had provided the foundation for the beginning of their friendship. Lavellan fondly brushed his fingers over the title.

"Will you read a few out to me?" asked Solas.

Lavellan shot him a look. "Are you sure you want to sit through me pausing every five seconds and ruining the poems?"

"Give it some time. It will come naturally."

Yes, it would, but only because he was holding the collective will of a few ancient elves in his head.

Lavellan handed the book back to Solas. "Why don't you walk me through it? Pick your favourites and I'll read them with you."

And that was how they found themselves sitting shoulder to shoulder, the rain pattering against the windowpanes and the fire crackling as Solas' melodic voice danced through the verses of the poems. Lavellan always paused when it was his turn to read, putting up an act of puzzling out the words first before saying the lines.

Night soon fell and the exhaustion of the trip caught up to them, so they stopped reading. Lavellan collapsed on his bed while Solas fed the fireplace more wood and fanned the flames back to a brighter glow.

“Before we return to Skyhold,” said Solas, “may we stop by Crestwood? There is... a place that I would like to show you. I recall you enjoy finding secret places.”

Lavellan paused. “Crestwood.”

“If it is not too inconvenient. I understand if you are busy and have much to return to.”

Crestwood.

He stared at Solas’ back, sorely wishing he’d turn around so that Lavellan could at least see his expression and glean his thoughts.

“I was trying to determine some way to show you what you mean to me.”

“What place?” Lavellan asked, mouth drying.

“I would rather keep it a surprise.”

Maybe it was a different place. Caves weren’t the only secret places in Crestwood.

“Okay,” said Lavellan, attempting to sound cheery. “I love secret places.”

Solas chuckled. Lavellan’s hands clenched over his thighs.

An awkward silence ensued.

“We should get some rest,” said Solas and retreated to his bed. Lavellan followed his lead and settled under the blankets, looking out the window at the rain.

“Goodnight,” said Lavellan.

“Goodnight.”

It took him a while to sleep, watching the parade of shadows that the flickering flames were casting, listening to the occasional roll of thunder.

Sleep eventually, mercifully, came.

Burning, searing.

Cold metal.

Burst of pain, a ragged cry—

Lavellan woke up, a roil of burning agony spreading from his stomach. He sat up, panicked, pressing a shaky hand to it to stem the bleeding.

But there was no blood. The pain vanished. He was fine.

What the hell was that? A nightmare?

He panted in the darkness of the room, the fire long gone. Lavellan lay back down and curled up into a ball, listening to the rain and the Well's storm of whispers.

It was dawn by the time Lavellan fell sleep.

He ended up sleeping in, but it didn't matter since the rain hadn't let up and they couldn't leave yet anyway. Solas spent most of the day reading while Lavellan whittled away at Revasha's pendant, stomach wringing tighter as the hours passed.

He'd occasionally remember his fragmented dream from earlier, then promptly push it away.

Once the rain let up around late afternoon, they rode for Crestwood. Solas said nothing else about where they were going, and it worsened the strung feeling in Lavellan's gut.

They reached Crestwood at twilight, and Solas found the place around early evening.

It was a cave entrance.

Right. Well... there were many caves in Crestwood. This could be a different cave.

They tied the horses to a nearby tree, Vergala perching on the tree to keep watch, before they entered the cave.

Lavellan lit the way with the Anchor, its green light glinting off the moisture coating the stalactites and stalagmites. Solas still said nothing. Lavellan's heartbeats thundered.

"You're being very quiet," Lavellan said.

"Is that not my usual?"

"This is a different quiet."

"And what kind is it?" Solas asked in that deflecting tone of his.

Lavellan couldn't answer him because they reached the end of the cave and his worst suspicions were proven correct.

The light of the Anchor sputtered and died.

The two, large halla statues stood above the small pond, moonlight spilling into the clearing, the Veil fluttering over his skin. It was as before. There were many things that Lavellan had forgotten, but he could never forget this.

He stopped at the mouth of the cave, his heartbeats too loud in his ears, too fast.

What the fuck?

Solas looked back at him and Lavellan forced himself to calm down, forcing the panic away from his expression.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting this,” was what Lavellan ended up saying. He congratulated himself on the believable delivery.

Solas couldn’t break up with him! They weren’t even together! And he couldn’t mention the vallaslin either since Lavellan already knew about it. So why were they here?

He smiled at Lavellan. “What were you expecting?”

“A grotto, maybe,” he lied. “Or a secret hideout. Like the one Warden Stroud had been hiding at.”

“I was not with you during that excursion.” He waited for Lavellan to walk forward so they could continue side by side. Lavellan’s heart wrung even further.

“I wonder why.”

Solas chuckled. “Imagine my surprise when I received a panicked letter asking me to help you sleep.”

“Who ratted me out?”

“The Veil is thin here,” said Solas, stopping to face him with a smile. Lavellan laughed. His heart was in his throat.

“That was a terrible topic change.”

“But you will let it slide?”

“Well you’ve been granting me such courtesies so far.” He stared at the water because that was easier, resisted shifting his weight from foot to foot. “I’ll return the favour. So yes, the Veil is thin here. Thankfully not damp.”

“Damp.”

“The Veil was damp last time we were here. Much better now.”

Another quiet settled between them.

Solas kept his gaze trained on the large halla statues. A gust of wind swayed the trees and Lavellan fiddled with the edge of the Dalish scarf.

“Inquisitor,” Solas started, then paused. He shook his head and looked down, clasping his hands behind his back. “Mahanon,” he said instead. Lavellan swallowed his heart back into his chest. “May I tell you a story?” Soft, his voice. Asking, begging for permission.

And all Lavellan could respond with was, “Always.”

Solas looked at him, eyes alive with a war of emotions.

“There once was a man,” started Solas, “who made mistake after mistake. He stumbled along foolishly, attempting to right his wrongs. But his attempts only led to worse consequences. On the day of the explosion at the Conclave, he was brought in to investigate the Dalish elf bearing a magical mark. The man raised his hand, intending to kill the Dalish and take the Anchor.”

Lavellan’s brows raised. He had intended to *what*?

“But he stayed his hand, believed it would be better to let these strangers do the work of closing the

Breach for him. Or at least allow them to attempt.”

“And this decision was a great *not*-mistake?” offered Lavellan.

Solas shot him an exasperated look. “The Dalish elf turned out to be argumentative, stubborn, and infuriating, with a touch of arrogance and a complete disregard for his own survival.”

“Alright, I deserved that one.”

Solas’ exasperation melted into a fond smile. “And yet, he was also thoughtful, persevering, and curious. Compassionate and determined. He made the man feel less alone.” Solas looked down. “Had he killed the Dalish elf that day, had he not stayed his hand... Then he wouldn’t have known that he’d made another mistake. He wouldn’t have known what he had just lost.”

“And what’s that?”

“He would have lost the world once more.”

Lavellan stared at him, pulse stuttering. He meant to say something, but he couldn’t find the words. He couldn’t have said anything even if he had the words because his whole body had frozen.

“And perhaps I am about to make another mistake now,” said Solas and he faced Lavellan fully, expression grim. “Mahanon, I...” He trailed off, grimacing at himself and averting his gaze.

Lavellan waited, nervousness licking at his chest.

Solas let out a breath. He hardened his expression.

“The best gift I can give to show you how much you mean to me is the truth,” said Solas.

But Lavellan already knew about the vallaslin? Unless—

“You told me once that we could not change in a dream.”

Lavellan’s eyes widened and his hammering heart punched his breath out of him.

That was... what he’d told Fen’Harel.

Solas met his gaze, eyes as hard as the crystals that Lavellan associated them with.

Heartbeat in Lavellan’s ears, an unnamed emotion clogging his lungs.

And Solas said:

“I am Fen’Harel.”

Chapter End Notes

To those who were chanting third time's the charm, how we all feelin?

I *did* say the week was gonna be interesting ☺ (And now nobody's ever trusting me again, huh?)

Also, that entire confrontation between Solas and Ellana during the talk of dreams and boundaries is expanded on in [Ellana's POV in Tapestry](#).

There once was a wolf

Chapter Notes

Everyone screaming last chapter had me cackling. Utterly delighted. (Also incredibly relieved because I was so anxious about that chapter hahdhfsda)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

who dared to risk it one more time

The silence sank like a stone. Lavellan's lips parted but no sound escaped. The clog in his lungs worsened to the point that any time he attempted to articulate a response, all that came out would be a disbelieving breath.

Solas smiled sadly. "Though I suspect you already knew."

"I did," Lavellan whispered, looked down because he couldn't— "But I never— I never thought you'd—"

He couldn't unclog his chest or untangle the sudden knotting of his heart and its furore of emotions, all of them still unnamed.

Lavellan closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. "I never thought you'd admit it."

He admitted it, he admitted it—

Lavellan laughed, a breathless, broken sound that disturbed the beautiful stillness of the evening. Unthinking, he reached forward and gripped Solas' coat.

They shared a look, warmth stinging behind Lavellan's eyes. After holding back for so long, after keeping up this wall of distance for so long, Lavellan finally allowed himself to break it and reach back. With trembling hands, he cradled Solas' face

Solas' careful expression crumbled at his touch, displaying the full extent of his exhaustion and sorrow and guilt. Lavellan pressed their foreheads together.

"Thank you," Lavellan whispered, and closed what distance remained between them.

And everything fell into place. The world faded until all Lavellan knew was the urgent way their lips claimed the other's, the weight and warmth of Solas' hand as it settled on Lavellan's cheek, arm encircling Lavellan's waist. Solas pulled him closer and held him tighter. As if Lavellan would disappear if he were to let go.

Lavellan deepened the kiss, as if to say, "I'm here. I'm not leaving. I'm here."

They kissed to the rhythm of their racing hearts, chasing the other as though on the cusp of a revelation. Solas pressed against him, seeking. Lavellan staggered back at the sudden weight, unbalanced in more ways than one. The kiss broke as they fell.

Solas placed his hand at the back of Lavellan's head to cushion it and braced his other arm against the ground so he wouldn't crush him. The jawbone necklace rested on Lavellan's stomach as Solas hovered above him. Lavellan laughed, the sound wet.

"Is this payback for pushing you to the ground the last time we kissed?" asked Lavellan.

Solas smiled, backlit by the moons and crowned by the stars, and Lavellan lost his breath. "I at least cushioned your fall. You offered no such courtesies. You also sat on my lap impetuously."

"I didn't hear any complaints."

"I was preoccupied."

There was a level of surrealness to it. That they could openly talk about it.

Lavellan reached up for him, cradling his face again and just... breathing. With him. Let the moment sink in.

"You admitted it," Lavellan whispered, his voice catching. Solas' gaze softened, the hand at the back of Lavellan's head moving to cup Lavellan's cheek again. As if Solas couldn't bear to not touch him in some way for too long.

"I suspect you have questions," Solas murmured.

The words reminded him of unwanted memories and sent another reel of unknown emotions hooking through Lavellan's heart.

"Later," he said and pulled Solas down to kiss him again. An act of desperation this time. He banished those memories, focusing on the differences: no pain in his arm, no cold from the water, no apologies, and no screams of anguish. Solas had admitted it of his own accord. Not from being chased. Not from being backed into a corner that he was too exhausted to fight his way out of.

But Solas tempered the desperation, slowed the pace into something unhurried and almost indulgent, lips pressing gently yet firmly. Lavellan calmed.

He could do this forever. Stay here forever. Where nothing else mattered besides each other.

But everything had an end, and questions still needed to be answered.

They parted with some difficulty, but neither made any further move to retreat. Lavellan blinked, trying to clear the fog in his head.

"Even better than dreams," Solas murmured, brushing his thumb along Lavellan's lower lip.

"Do I taste gold?" he teased.

"You taste real."

Lavellan pulled him down without warning and Solas crashed on top of him in surprise. The collision knocked the breath out of them but Lavellan only tightened his embrace and buried his face into the crook of Solas' neck. The jawbone necklace pressed against his ribs, blades of grass tickling his ears and nape.

"Just... stay here," said Lavellan. "For a moment."

Solas pulled the necklace out of the way then settled, his head resting on Lavellan's chest. They

stayed like that for the longest moment, content to bask in one another's warmth and weight.

"I thought you would be angry," whispered Solas.

"No."

"Or afraid."

"Did I ever give you that impression?"

Solas was quiet for a moment.

Then, softly, "No. No, it was I who was afraid."

He pushed himself off Lavellan and the loss of his warmth made a coil of panic wrap around Lavellan's neck. He almost tightened his hold so Solas couldn't leave, but he pushed that impulse aside and let Solas sit back. Lavellan sat up, resting his shaky hands over his thighs.

"Why now?" asked Lavellan.

Solas lowered his gaze, exhaustion lining his features. "It was no impulsive choice. I had long considered telling you."

"That night during Revasha's birthday, and then on the balcony. You were about to tell me, weren't you?"

"I— Yes." He shook his head. "But I could not bring myself to."

Lavellan frowned. "Are you... sure you're ready to answer questions? We can wait until—"

"No. I will only run." He steeled his expression and looked up, met Lavellan's gaze with a determined frown. "What would you know of me?"

"How much are you willing to answer?"

He hesitated. "I... am not certain yet, but it never hurts to try."

"If this is a dream, I will be very cross."

That garnered Lavellan a small smile at least. "So will I, but I am reasonably certain we are awake now."

Lavellan sorted through the noise of his screaming thoughts, searching for his coherency.

"You suspected I knew," said Lavellan. "Since when?"

"After Halamshiral, perhaps, though I had also wondered if it was wishful thinking on my part. How long have you truly known?"

Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat, a pressure building in his chest.

From your very beginning.

"The first excursion to the Dales," he said, the lie stinging on his lips and tongue. "I suspected."

Solas' brows raised. "That was earlier than I thought." He paused, then sharply looked away, lips pursing. "The baths then the dream... You kissed me knowing it was me."

“Did you really think,” asked Lavellan in mild disbelief, “that I’d just kiss a random man who I’ve only met a handful of times in my dreams?”

His expression soured. “When phrased in that manner...”

“Furthermore,” said Lavellan, “that happened after the bath. Did you *really* think the one I’d be looking for was said random stranger in the dream and not you?”

“I almost kissed you in the baths.”

“I would have let you.”

Solas finally looked back at him. “It would not have been wise.”

“Solas, we’ve long crossed the line of wise.”

He chuckled. “True enough.”

They stared at each other, now uncertain of where they stood. But Lavellan had promised, hadn’t he? Solas had shared his truth and now it was Lavellan’s turn. His heartbeat paced once again.

“I promised to tell you the truth in return,” Lavellan said, mind spinning. He looked down at his clenched hands. What should he do? Which should he tell?

Whichever lets you run for longer.

But that was unfair to Solas. Solas had braved it despite his fears, had told Lavellan the truth despite his hesitation, and Lavellan owed it to him to try in return.

“The truth,” Lavellan tried again but his head couldn’t settle on one. He gritted his teeth, palms sweating.

“You do not have to,” said Solas and Lavellan’s head snapped up. “Not now. Not until you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready?” he asked.

His gaze softened. “That cannot happen.”

“That...” Lavellan let out a shaky breath as he looked down once more. “That’s fair.”

Solas reached for his hand and intertwined their fingers together, pressing a gentle kiss upon a knuckle. Lavellan grew sick of the distance between them and sat on Solas’ lap.

“Will this become a bad habit of yours?” asked Solas, smiling as his hands settled on Lavellan’s hips.

“Why?” He rested his hands on Solas’ shoulders and leaned close. “Are you going to indulge it?”

“I find myself always indulging you. Though if you wish for me to answer any further questions properly, you will do well to get off me. You are quite distracting.”

“Consider it an exercise of willpower.”

“Seeing as I kissed you after the baths, you well know the true strength of my willpower.”

Lavellan grinned. “Well, that’s why I called it an exercise. You have to work on it. Isn’t willpower very important for mage— mmph—!”

Solas kissed him again. Just as slow as the last time but deeper, hungrier, and his grip on Lavellan’s hips tightened. He played with the hem of Lavellan’s shirt, teasing the skin beneath, before he grew bolder and sought more. Rough and warm hands roamed over heating skin.

Lavellan’s shuddery exhale broke the kiss. He dipped his head and brushed his lips along Solas’ neck instead, kissing the pulse fluttering beneath his skin.

The pressure in Lavellan’s chest only grew, pressing into all parts of him, a force opposing the veil of Solas’ all-encompassing presence.

“Solas,” he whispered into the skin of Solas’ neck, but he couldn’t continue. Couldn’t articulate what this pressure was. Solas curled his fingers, nails scratching lightly. Lavellan trembled, his grip on Solas’ shoulders tightening to the point of hurting his fingertips and quite possibly Solas’ shoulders too.

“I meant it,” Solas murmured into his ear. “If you do not get off me, I do not know how well I can control myself.”

Lavellan rested his forehead against the curve of Solas’ shoulders and closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths.

I don’t care, was already on the tip of his tongue but he bit it back.

“Do you want to stop?” Lavellan asked.

“What I want is unideal for the practicality of the situation.”

Lavellan raised his head and met Solas’ gaze, couldn’t breathe from its intensity. His presence was *everywhere*. All Lavellan could do was wrap it around himself and bury himself deeper within it, let it seep into him.

“What do you want?” he asked regardless, slightly breathless.

Solas parted his lips to answer but no sound came out. He merely stared at Lavellan, transfixed.

“Are you certain I am not dreaming?” Solas asked.

Lavellan smiled. “Why? Have you dreamt of this before?”

He didn’t answer. Lavellan eased his grip on Solas’ shoulders.

“What do you want?” Lavellan asked again.

“I want...” A small, shuddering exhale escaped him. “I want to have you all to myself. But such a possessive claim is unbecoming. You are not mine to claim and I would not wish for you to be owned by anyone other than yourself.”

An advocate for free-will above all else—

Eyes glowed blue — his body ceased to respond to him, moving instead to the rhythm of a fallen god.

Lavellan kissed Solas to banish that memory, heart hammering madly.

“You can’t own me. I will not let you,” Lavellan whispered into the kiss.

“I have no wish to own you,” he responded, lips brushing.

“I am my own.”

“As am I.”

“I love you, but I will not surrender wholly.”

After all, they both knew the confines of bondage.

“I would not have it any other way.” Solas paused. “You love me?”

Lavellan couldn’t help but laugh. “More than what is wise.”

The stars may have been hung on the sky, but the spark in Solas’ eyes outshone even the brightest one. Lavellan searched his eyes for any constellations.

Solas smiled.

Ah, there it was.

“Ar lath, ma vhenan,” said Solas.

Lavellan smiled in return, the stinging warmth returning to his eyes.

“Ar lath, ma vhenan,” he echoed, voice trembling.

Once again, they had placed their hearts in each other’s hands but Lavellan now knew the true weight of this. Of carrying Solas’ heart. The *trust*—

Was this how Solas had felt when Lavellan had given him his heart the first time? Had he felt undeserving and frightened? Had he arranged the weight of the heart in his hands and the weight of the lies on his shoulders into a careful balancing act so that the lies wouldn’t spill onto the heart?

“I’m scared,” Lavellan admitted.

Solas embraced him. “As am I,” he murmured. “But we will determine how to proceed. Together.”

“Together,” said Lavellan.

Together.

They returned to Skyhold in the same silence they’d left in, but this was more at ease, an aftermath where they could absorb and come to terms with what had just happened.

Upon reaching the bridge to Skyhold, Solas halted his horse and Lavellan stopped as well.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lavellan.

Solas frowned. “I was merely thinking, and I thought I should ask you first. I am not certain if you

are aware, but I have agents within Skyhold.”

“I know about Samara.” And many more, but he kept his mouth shut. “I reasoned that you likely had a few more within the Inquisition.”

“Yes, I do. Are you amenable to me informing them that you are aware of who I am?”

Lavellan paused. “I’m not sure what the implications of that would be. Will that be will-received?”

“Perhaps too well-received.”

He laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I am not unaware of their gossiping.” Solas glanced at him. “They are hoping we will work together.”

“Really?”

“They are fond of you.”

“Oh.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh.”

Solas smiled. “Is that surprising? They feel seen by you. You have gone through great lengths to ensure that those working for you are heard and cared for.”

Lavellan was quite used to being almost murdered by his agents numerous times so yes, this new development came as a surprise.

Although, he couldn’t deny that he *was* interested in seeing how this new development would unfold.

“Alright,” said Lavellan. “I’m a little curious to see how this will go.”

“You have that glint in your eyes again. Perhaps I should rescind this decision—”

“No takebacks.” Lavellan snapped the reins and urged his horse into a gallop, laughing. Solas took off after him and they raced to the gates. Lavellan won.

“You had an unfair advantage,” said Solas, smiling as they led their horses back to the stables.

“Don’t be a sore loser, vhenan.”

Solas’ smile softened at the term.

Samara was working at the stables when they arrived. She looked up at their arrival and gave a small wave, taking the reins from them.

“Welcome back,” she said. “I hope you had a safe trip.”

“Eventful,” said Lavellan.

Solas looked at him in question, and at Lavellan’s nod, he whispered something to Samara. Her eyes widened. Then she grinned.

“Right away, [Mirthadra^{\[1\]}](#),” she said to Solas and rushed out, forgetting about the horses. She backpedalled immediately and took the horses away with a sheepish look. “Ah, I forgot about

them,” she mumbled to herself.

Lavellan watched with amusement as she left.

“How long until all of your agents know?” asked Lavellan.

“If they run, which I highly suspect they will? Five minutes.”

Lavellan snorted and the two of them walked back to the Great Hall, shoulders brushing as they walked.

“Our conversation is far from finished,” said Solas, “but I need a little more time to sort my thoughts out further.”

“This was a big admission, Solas. I won’t deny you your time.”

“Thank you.” He paused. “But refrain from sitting on me again.”

Lavellan grinned. “No promises.”

There was no respite for Lavellan because his Inquisitorial duties demanded his attention during the day. It was a good enough distraction because the reality of the situation was still setting in.

He walked into the War Council and tried to go about his business, but Leliana wouldn’t stop staring at him.

“What?” he asked after sorting out a problem in Nevarra.

Josephine and Cullen stared at him and Leliana in question.

“The trip went well,” deduced Leliana, smiling. “*Very* well.”

“We didn’t die. So, yes, very well.” He cleared his throat. “What is the state of the Orlesian army? Ready for the march?”

She waved her hand. “No, we’ve already discussed that last time. You’re not escaping.” Her smile widened, settling into that sly smile of hers. “You seem distracted today.”

“The month is Solace, is it not?” asked Josephine out of the blue.

Leliana hummed as if she understood where the sudden question came from. “It is.”

Cullen made a soft, frustrated sound, face pulling. But it was brief and Lavellan wasn’t sure whether he’d imagined it or not.

“I’m just tired from the trip,” said Lavellan. “Hence being distracted.”

“No, I know the weary kind of distracted,” said Leliana. “Have there been any new developments?”

“Why is this so important to you?” he grumbled. “Fine, fine, yes. I suppose you can consider us lovers.”

“That is splendid, Inquisitor!” said Josephine, her expression brightening. “I am happy for you.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

“He will be a light by your side in the darkness,” Leliana said.

He hoped so. This time, he hoped so. And hope he did because it was burning bright and fierce in his chest.

And nothing lasts.

Lavellan shoved that thought aside.

“How do you wish to handle this information?” asked Leliana. Pragmatic as ever. “And its spread?”

“It isn’t a secret, but I don’t exactly want it advertised either. I want personal things to remain as private as possible, without the scrutiny of a thousand other pairs of eyes. Besides, Solas isn’t one for great public attention either.”

She nodded. “Then it shall be done. I will do what I can.”

Cullen chuckled mildly. “Although our friends will likely find out within the day.”

“We have such annoying, nosy friends, don’t we?” asked Lavellan.

Lavellan returned to his quarters to attend to his paperwork and letters, occasionally staring up at the mural and smiling.

[Gelasha^{\[2\]}](#), said the Well.

His smile faded.

[Harellan, harellan, harellan!](#) it hissed in glee. [Ma telir eolasas harathe. Fen te'harellan min.](#)^[3]

No— He’d tell Solas the truth eventually.

But which one?

He buried his head in his hands.

He had to tell the truth soon. Solas would be understanding, wouldn’t he? He would be. Lavellan just had to... prepare himself. He’d take care of business within the Arbor Wilds first, sort things out with the Well of Sorrows, *then* he would tell Solas the truth.

After the Arbor Wilds.

Which truth?

Both. It had to be both. He shouldn’t run. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise, and he didn’t want their relationship to be built on lies. That applied to Lavellan, too. If lies had destroyed them last time, it

would destroy them this time, so he had to come forward.

What if he leaves again?

Everyone leaves.

Everyone had left.

Lavellan gripped his hair. No. That wasn't true. He had people now, he'd saved them, had kept them alive. Ellana and the clan were alive. Blackwall was alive. Bull was loyal. Leliana was less ruthless. He'd saved more people in Haven with his foreknowledge. He'd saved more.

He'd changed events. Changed people.

He could keep changing them. He could keep them by his side. He could save them. He could keep who he could alive!

They wouldn't leave. Not this time. Not too early, at least.

The Well laughed at him.

[“Telahna^{\[4\]}”](#), he said coldly.

It retreated. Lavellan sighed and raised his head, his good mood ruined. He worked through more letters instead (the ones that didn't make him want to smash his head into a wall).

Five letters later, someone knocked and opened the door. Solas came into the room. Lavellan relaxed and smiled.

“Hello,” Lavellan greeted. “Are you finished for today?”

“Yes. Perhaps you should retire for the day too. You did not allow yourself to rest after our journey.” He walked over to Lavellan's side and rubbed his shoulders soothingly. Lavellan rested his head against Solas.

“Five more letters.”

“One.”

“Four.”

“Vhenan,” Solas said, tone reprimanding.

“...Three,” said Lavellan.

Solas sighed. “Three,” he agreed. He picked out a book from Lavellan's shelf and sat at the couch to read it while Lavellan worked through the three letters.

The third letter had an unknown seal, but the wax was blue. Orlesian. Which house was this from? He frowned and opened it.

Inquisitor,

I flew.

- Briala

Alliances:

And below it was a list of prominent Orlesian noble houses.

Lavellan laughed in disbelief. Solas looked up in question and Lavellan held up the letter.

“*Twenty-five* houses in half a year,” said Lavellan. “All allied with Marquise Briala.”

“Yes, she’s been... determined. The loss of most of her network didn’t seem to faze her.”

Right. The eluvians. Lavellan put the paper down, and the mood between them shifted. Solas closed the book and sat up straighter.

“You said you gave us a chance because you wanted to be proven wrong,” said Lavellan. “Wrong about what?”

Solas looked down. “About the strength of the modern elves. An... old friend of mine had vouched for the elves’ tenacity, and I...” He didn’t finish his sentence. Lavellan’s heart twisted. Felassan.

“*Did you have to bury him?*” Lavellan didn’t ask.

“I have seen how persevering you all are,” murmured Solas. “But I could not let myself believe that everything is real. I did not want to make things harder than they already were. And yet... I am sorry that I... I am sorry.” He hung his head. “I am sorry.”

Lavellan stood and crossed the room so he could sit beside Solas and hold his hand.

“I wanted to save my people,” Solas said. “I tried to speak out, initially. You already know the outcome of that.”

With his soldiers burnt and a title he never wanted bestowed upon him.

“They may have called me a god, but I had no real seat of power. All I had was the burden of unwanted divinity and the fear of those I had sworn to protect. No real power to incite change.”

“You *were* powerful,” said Lavellan. “In terms of magic.”

Solas shook his head. “You may place a sword in a ruler’s hand, but you cannot place a crown on a soldier’s head. Not even the most martially apt of warriors could ever unseat or surpass a sovereign power. Not without chaos.” He scoffed at himself. “And chaos I certainly brought. The destruction of what I wished to save. This is not the change I had wished to make.”

“You sought change,” said Lavellan softly, “but sought too much. Then chaos.”

He smiled wryly. “If I may briefly go on a tangent... Did you know that there are spirits of Change?”

Lavellan’s heart stopped momentarily but he kept up an act of being unmoved. “I would assume they exist,” he said. “But what about them?”

“They are quite rare. Strange, is it not? That a spirit embodying an ideal abundant in both the Fade and the waking world is so scarce? It had baffled some of our best scholars.”

“So why were they rare?”

“Simply, they are volatile, easily corrupted. Spirits of Change are aware of this volatility, and they

often overcompensate by stagnating. But that is defying their nature. They twist, become Envy. A being that always seeks to change itself, reaching for another being to mimic because they have lost themselves.”

Lavellan frowned. “The Envy demon at Therinfal...”

“Could have once been a spirit of Change.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“Alternatively,” said Solas, “Change spirits could vie for too much change. They become Entropy. The chaos of decay.”

“Have you met a Change spirit before?”

“I don’t believe so, no.”

Interesting... That was something else that needed investigation.

Solas smiled sadly. “And I have vied for too much change, caused a chaotic degradation. It was— There was so much... pain.” His grip tightened around Lavellan’s hand. “And fear. I had lost Mythal, our plan had fallen apart, and I knew the Evanuris would direct their fury at me. But they would not have punished me; they would have punished those who were fighting for me. I had promised sanctuary and safety to those I had freed, and I could not— I could not bear to see them suffer because of my mistakes again. I wanted to protect the People, and yet I have damned them.”

His voice broke. He closed his eyes, expression turning pained.

“It *hurts*,” he admitted, hissing the word out as if he could expel his pain if he uttered it hard enough. Lavellan gathered him in his arms and held him through the vicious wave of sorrow and guilt and weariness and so much more that had wracked him. Solas let out a choked sound, but he bit it back, his body trembling from his effort to keep himself together.

“It’s only me,” Lavellan whispered. “I have no expectations of you to be an unwavering figure. Let it out. Let it pass.”

Solas held onto Lavellan like a lifeline and screamed into his shoulder.

While Solas’ tears after Wisdom’s death had been quiet and muted, this time, his tears were raw, coming from the very depths of himself. They ravaged their way out, violent, and roaring.

They had no auras now, but Lavellan could still feel the debilitating weight of what Solas was shouldering.

Oh, my love, your back is bruised from what you carry.

Lavellan’s heart wrenched and he shed a few, quiet tears for him.

Cole appeared, called by the potent hurt, already holding a tray of food and a pitcher full of water. Lavellan gestured at the cabinet where he kept cups and plates (Josephine’s idea — don’t ask).

Another violent sob wracked Solas and Lavellan held him through it, rubbing his back.

Night fell, and the room darkened, lit only by the glow from the light sources on Skyhold’s battlements and courtyard.

Solas' cries slowly eased, the tension in his body leaving him in a rush. He slumped against Lavellan, exhausted. Cole passed Lavellan a cloth and a cup of water before lighting the fireplace and a few candles.

"Here," Lavellan said gently and offered Solas the cloth.

He accepted it with a hoarse, "Thank you."

"Cole brought some food. Would you like to eat?"

Solas shook his head as he wiped his face, too tired for words. Lavellan offered him the water next and he took a few sips.

"Come, vhenan," murmured Lavellan and helped Solas stand. They walked to the bed and shuffled into it, leaning back against the headboard. Lavellan pulled the blankets up over their lap.

"I am not sleepy," Solas said, a tad indignant.

"But you're tired. That was a cry long overdue and I'd like to hug you without pulling half of my muscles." Lavellan turned to Cole and smiled. "Thank you, Cole."

Cole nodded and turned to Solas. "Centuries full of sleeping sorrow. The sun is warm." He disappeared. The fire crackled in the fireplace.

Solas stared at the fire, drained. Lavellan shuffled closer to him and laid his head on Solas' shoulder.

"A young deer once got lost within the forest," Lavellan started softly. "Night was fast approaching, and nobody answered her calls for help."

He laid his head on Lavellan's. "A Dalish tale?"

"Yes. For children, to be exact. It was my favourite. I used to annoy everyone when I kept asking our Hahren to tell it again."

Solas chuckled. And so, Lavellan told him the story, then moved on to the one about the angry bear, and so on. He shared children's tales, then branched out to Antivan tales he'd heard from Josephine, some Avvar tales that he'd gotten from Sky Watcher, and a variety of others.

He eventually ran out of stories. They stayed in the quiet for a while, just taking comfort in one another's presence and watching the fire.

"Thank you," Solas whispered.

Lavellan interlaced their fingers together and pressed a lingering kiss on Solas' knuckles.

"If you have any questions—"

"Hush, vhenan," said Lavellan. "Rest first."

They lay down and Solas pulled Lavellan close, his back against Solas' chest, and it felt like a lifetime ago since they'd last done this. It felt like it belonged to a time that Lavellan had dreamt. Something that could fall apart at any moment.

Again, he cast the thought aside and focused instead on the warmth behind him, the weight of Solas' arm across his torso, their soft breaths.

It wasn't long before Lavellan fell asleep.

Lavellan stabbed Cassandra.

He looked up in horror but no, it was Solas who he had stabbed.

Lavellan let out a choked scream.

He startled awake, heart racing. It was dark in the room, the dying fireplace offering only a pitiful source of light. Mocking shadows danced along the walls. Solas was still beside him. Lavellan turned gently as to not wake him and felt along Solas' torso, made sure that it wasn't there, it wasn't—

It wasn't there.

He was fine. No blood. Lavellan exhaled in shaky relief and wrapped his arms around Solas, burying his face into Solas' chest.

“You're fine, you're fine,” he whispered manically and closed his eyes. “I didn't mean to, please believe me. I didn't mean to.”

But you did. You meant to bury that blade. You meant to take him with you.

Lavellan hugged Solas tighter and hummed his mother's lullaby softly, trying to calm himself with Solas' even breathing.

The Well murmured in his head.

Harellan.

Chapter End Notes

Aww, they're happy :)

(Solas needed a massive cry. He needed it. An honest-to-god screaming cry because the man has been emotionally repressed for too long and hasn't gotten the opportunity to be truly vulnerable.)

Translation

[1] **Mirthadra:** Honoured (a term of respect)^{[1][2]}

[2] **Gelasha:** Coward^{[1][2]}

[3]

Harellan, harellan, harellan!: Deceiver, deceiver, deceiver!

Ma telir eolasas harathe. Fen te'harellan min: You only know deceit. The Wolf is not the liar here [\[1\]](#)

[4] **Telahna:** Be quiet [\[1\]](#)

Where the wilds sing

Chapter Notes

Happy 11th of March, the day that paper was invented 1916 years ago during the Han dynasty by a guy called Cai Lun. Huzzah

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

an ancient, forgotten hymn

The weeks ticked down. They would march to the Arbor Wilds soon.

One month left.

The Well of Sorrows would taunt Lavellan periodically, but he finally snapped tonight and threatened to cut out their tongues. It was a rather stupid threat in hindsight because they were a collective will and thus, had no tongues to cut, and that sort of brutality was the exact thing he frowned upon.

But it still worked.

Blessed silence. As silent as the Well could get, anyway.

Lavellan searched for Dorian to give him the news about their quest to find Corypheus' real name, and found him reading in the garden. Dorian looked up at his approach and his expression brightened.

"My dearest Inquisitor!" he greeted. "A pleasant afternoon to you. Do you have need of me?"

"Good afternoon, Dorian." He raised the letter from House Amladaris. "Corypheus' dear family got back in touch."

"Oh? Come, come, let's sit at the table." They sat at where they would usually play chess and Lavellan laid the reports out.

"Josephine suggested we blackmail them and Leliana suggested to send the information as an offer of *goodwill*," said Lavellan. "I was surprised at the suggestion actually. Usually their responses are reversed. Josephine's gotten a little sneaky lately— Are you even listening?"

Dorian had been grinning at him the entire time.

"Do you want to know House Amladaris' response to the Corypheus accusations or not?" he asked.

Dorian propped his arms up on the desk and rested his chin on his interlocked fingers. "Tell me everything!"

“Okay, well, they reacted very fast which tells us that they already knew about this particular scandal—”

“No, no, no!” Dorian waved his hands as if shooing away a bothersome insect. “That is so boring, tell me that later.”

“Excuse me, good sir, this happens to be important information.”

“Paperwork is important but that doesn’t make it any less of a humdrum. I am more interested in this little short trip you and Solas took. What happened? Who confessed? What happened after?”

Lavellan sighed and put the paper down. He should have known Dorian was after something else.

“I hope you lost five silvers,” said Lavellan. It turned out that Varric had started a betting pool on when Lavellan and Solas would finally get together. More than half of Skyhold had been in on it, apparently. Those who had bet on the month of Solace had won. He’d considered firing Varric and Dorian since they’d spearheaded the entire thing, but the paperwork required for the process wasn’t something Lavellan wanted to tackle.

“Because I refused to choose the month based on its proximity of sound to Solas’ name,” he huffed. “I may have lost five silvers, but I still have my dignity. It’s what I tell Bull anyway. For someone who gets paid plenty of gold monthly, he sure enjoys five measly silvers.”

“Because he gets to be right,” Lavellan muttered.

“And he’s happy to see two friends finally knock their heads together.”

“Speaking of two friends knocking heads together, you and Bull?”

“We’re old news, and we’re not talking about us! We’re talking about *you*. We are celebrating your ascension from the ashes of obliviousness!” His grin softened into a smile. “I’m happy for you, Mahanon. Truly.”

Lavellan gave him a small smile back. “Thanks, Dorian.”

Dorian observed him, smile fading into a frown. He leaned forward and clasped his hands over the table.

“But are you happy for you?” he asked.

Lavellan blinked. “What?”

“You seem... troubled.”

“I... No. It’s fine.”

He shot Lavellan a sceptical look. “Truly?”

Lavellan hesitated. That was all Dorian needed.

“Is there trouble? Did he hurt you?”

“What? No! No. He’s fine. He’s...” Lavellan looked away. “He’s been great. It’s me. I’m fucking this up.”

“How?”

“I just am.” He bit back the petulance in his tone and sighed. “There’s always something to fuck it up.”

Dorian stared at him, his frown deepening as the seconds passed. He leaned back.

“Inquisitor, if you keep waiting for some vague, hidden shoe to drop, one day you’ll drop your own.” His expression softened. “It’s self-sabotage. You must recognise this. You cannot let this ruin what happiness you’ve managed to attain. The world can go on continuing to go to shit but let Solas be a safe harbour.”

“You can’t depend on one thing to be a safe harbour,” he snapped. “When that safe harbour is gone, where the fuck does that leave you? Ass naked in the middle of a shitty ocean!”

Dorian’s eyes widened and Lavellan froze, both taken aback by his outburst.

Solas *had* been his safe harbour, his shelter, his *home*, but where the fuck had that left him when Solas had left? When he’d tried to throw the shitty world into the trash for good? Nothing was stationary. Nothing could be a safe harbour for long. Families, friends, lovers — they leave or they die or *both*.

But that Solas had been different.

Was he? They were the same man. Lavellan couldn’t keep doing this, couldn’t keep doing this stupid dividing to preserve what little stability he had.

Solas had also held him close before, had also whispered *I love you* and *my heart* and embraced Lavellan during evenings and made him ridiculously warm and happy. Where had that left them?

But things are different now!

Were they?

Lavellan stood abruptly. “I just remembered I left some important reports in my quarters, excuse me.”

“Wait—”

He fled.

“You’re putting it off,” said Ellana.

“I know,” Lavellan murmured.

Three weeks left.

The War Room was quiet, the War Council already concluded. Lavellan leaned over the table and

studied the map.

The Arbor Wilds was going to be a large and dangerous operation. How had it gone last time? What casualties had they suffered? Was there a way to circumvent those casualties?

The door to the War Room opened and Lavellan jumped. Solas entered.

“Oh,” said Lavellan, relaxing. “Hello.”

“Hello.” He closed the door. “I was delivering a few documents to Ambassador Montilyet and she mentioned that you haven’t left. Is everything alright?”

Lavellan looked down at the map. “Worried, I guess. Nothing new.”

Solas stood beside him and glanced down at the plans, silent for a moment. He tapped on an area on the map.

“This may be a vulnerable place,” he said. “The hill beside it obscures this north-eastern area and your soldiers may get ambushed.”

“I didn’t even see that,” he muttered and quickly scribbled it in. “Thank you.”

“Will you rest now? Judging by the copious notes on the map, you’ve tortured yourself enough for one afternoon.”

“What if I’m missing *something*—”

“Vhenan,” he said firmly and eased the pencil away from Lavellan’s hand, “if there is something you have missed, you will not see it while you are exhausted. Step back and return to it when you are better rested.”

He sighed and Solas put the pencil down.

“I understand your last encounter with Corypheus ended poorly,” said Solas. “And your apprehension is founded, but I believe it will be alright.”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of Corypheus. I just don’t want to lose a lot of people. I don’t even see Corypheus as a very big threat.”

Solas tilted his head in question.

“Well— He *is* a threat, but... I just see him as a child throwing a hissy fit, playing with toys he doesn’t understand and endangering others.” He crossed his arms and leaned back against the table, looking out the window. “I don’t think he knows how to use the orb properly, either. Though I’m still not entirely sure what the orb is. You said it was a channel for power.”

Solas looked out the window as well. “It accumulates ambient magic. Worship turns this ambient magic more potent, which is why worship had given the Evanuris even greater strength. Should one of the Evanuris ever require an immediate burst of power, they need only go to their charged foci.”

So it was the same principle as ingesting lyrium. Amplified to the nth degree. “I’m a little surprised Elgar’nan agreed to let you have your own foci.”

He smiled at Lavellan. “Ah, when did I say that Elgar’nan knew I had one?”

Lavellan stared at him, then laughed. “Naughty,” he said fondly.

“Only mildly.” He chuckled to himself, but his smile faded as the seconds passed. He shook his head. “Still, I had misjudged Corypheus once, and I will not make the same mistake twice. I would rather retrieve the orb from him before he learns how to use it.”

The next question to flash through Lavellan’s mind was: *What are you going to do with it?*

Lavellan’s smile also faded.

They still haven’t talked about Solas’ plans after Corypheus, and neither of them had attempted to breach it yet.

“Solas,” Lavellan murmured, the atmosphere between them changing. “What are you trying to stop?”

“You are already worrying about too many things. I would not wish to add to your concerns.”

“I’ll just worry about what it is.” He gave Solas a wry smile. “I’ll worry either way.”

He sighed and Lavellan stared, waiting.

“A terrible force,” Solas eventually answered. “With enough strength to weaken a Titan. A weapon for war. Do you know the origins of the darkspawn?”

“Chantry says the magisters who tried to enter the Golden City got turned into darkspawn.”

“By what?”

Lavellan’s stomach dropped.

Malice. Poison.

“The weapon is a primordial kind of magic,” said Solas. “The antithesis of the Fade’s energy.”

“Void magic?” Lavellan tentatively guessed, hoping he was wrong.

Solas nodded grimly.

Lavellan let out a heavy breath. “Well, shit.”

“The Forgotten wished to use this power again during their war with the Evanuris. The Evanuris wished to use the Blighted Titans to combat this.”

“*What?*” Lavellan hissed. That was lunacy! Surely Dirthamen wouldn’t have agreed to that? Surely *Lavellan* wouldn’t have agreed to that?

“Mythal contested this and we worked together in secret to stop them.” His gaze turned steely. “Dirthamen eventually approached us, claiming to be against the plan, too. You know how that ends.”

Lavellan gripped the table edge. Something wasn’t right. Something didn’t add up right. Surely not. Dirthamen was loyal to his family, surely not—

But what if it was family against family? Who would he pick then?

“I raised the Veil to imprison the Evanuris and Forgotten, and to seal this magic away. This... poison.”

But Solas had implied that the Chantry’s tale about the magisters and darkspawn *were* somewhat true. That they’d turned into darkspawn upon entering the Golden City.

Because the poison was in the Golden City. Black City. Whatever.

And the magisters had broken the seals. Not completely, he’d assume, otherwise they wouldn’t be standing here today. So maybe the seals weren’t broken, but damaged. What could the seals be?

Didn’t one of the Canticles mention something about the Black City having seven gates?

“There are seven gates to the Black City...” Lavellan mumbled, pushing off the table and pacing in thought, trying to make sense of the pieces laid in front of him. “There are nine Evanuris. Minus you and Mythal... Seven.” He stopped. “Solas... where are the Evanuris?”

Solas’ expression grew sombre. “They are the gates. The seals.”

Neither of them moved. Lavellan stopped breathing.

Dirthamen—

“But when the magisters tampered with one of the gates,” Solas continued, voice softer, almost a whisper, “they began spreading this poison. You now know it as the Taint. It is a new and less potent form of the poison. Now we are dealing with this on top of the original source.”

Fenedhis. Lavellan leaned on the table to support himself.

“If a gate was tampered with, what’re the implications for the Evanuris?” asked Lavellan.

“That is what I do not know,” Solas murmured. “And I am still unsure what the connection with the Taint and the Old Gods are. I suspect that the Old Gods are somehow linked to the Forgotten Ones, but I do not have any conclusive evidence.”

“Remind me again why your solution is to tear the Veil down? If that frees the Evanuris, there go the seals.”

“The Veil is artificial. It is not the natural state of the world, and it is already deteriorating. Do you not feel it? It is weaker in areas, sometimes nigh non-existent in others.” Solas crossed his arms and frowned at the floor. “It will fall either way, but waiting for too long will spread the poison more. And...” His expression soured. “I will need the Evanuris’ help. It would also help if the elves were to regain their connection to the Fade. There will be a window of time after I tear down the Veil, a delay, before the poison is freed. We will have to work within that window of time.”

“At what cost?” Lavellan asked, trying to curb his urge to yell.

Solas scowled. “Do *you* have any better ideas? Would you rather everybody perishes? I am left with no choice but to look at this from a utilitarian perspective. It does not mean I derive joy from it.”

Lavellan clenched his hands, feeling his nails digging into his palms.

Silence fell over them like a weighted blanket.

“What state are the Evanuris in?” Lavellan couldn’t help but ask. “Are they... awake? Aware in

some way or form? Are they asleep?"

Was Dirthamen being tormented from being in the poison's vicinity, unable to escape, unable to move, yet forced to be aware? Forced to feel the march of time?

"I am not so cruel," Solas murmured. "No matter how much they deserve to feel the pain that they have inflicted, I would not subject them to such a torment. They are in a dreamless sleep. Unaware." He stared at the map on the table. "But again, I do not know what the effects of a damaged gate would be."

Lavellan forced his hands to unclench, palms sore from his nails.

Solas sighed. "But let us focus on the upcoming campaign first. It is the more urgent matter. There will be no use worrying about this poison if Corypheus attains the godhood he desires."

The tension bled away from the room, but another question still hung in the air.

What do you plan to do after Corypheus?

Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat and instead whispered, "Okay."

Two weeks left.

"Inquisitor," Dagna exclaimed when she saw him, already yanking him by the arm to her workstation. "I finished the daggers!"

Most of their forces were already marching to the Arbor Wilds, but the Undercroft was still busy, rushing to fill last-minute orders.

"The schematic you found was incredible," she gushed over the clanging of metal. "There's a compartment *in* the hilts. One hilt holds poison, and the other holds the antidote. I kept the original hilt and had Harritt forge a new blade from an alloy of veil quartz and nevarrite. The veil quartz makes it *really* responsive to runes.

His brows raised. "Veil quartz and nevarrite? You were able to do that?"

They stopped at her table where his new daggers rested, covered with a cloth.

"See, the schematic mentioned an alloy between veil quartz and a mysterious metal," she said, "and after some research, I found out that its properties matched with nevarrite's. Must've been a different name back then. I didn't even know you could make alloys with veil quartz. This changes *everything*!" Stars sparkled in her eyes. "I did the same runes as your old daggers, but they're *more* potent."

He uncovered the daggers and let out an awed breath. Sleek, beautiful, *his*. The blades were a dark and deep purple, courtesy of the nevarrite, but it held an iridescent sheen from the veil quartz. Lavellan held it in his hands. The weight was perfect.

He gestured for Dagna to step back and he trialled some of the Water Dance forms with it. They moved like an extension of himself, cutting through the air with nary a whistle or disturbance of wind.

“Incredible,” he breathed. “How flexible?”

“A good middle. Here, I’ll show you how to access the vials in the hilt—”

Lavellan pushed and twisted the pommel, then pulled. A small, cylindrical compartment slid out, a vial secured into it. It was empty for now.

“Oh,” said Dagna. “You figured it out.”

“I read the schematic,” he lied. “Do you know how they broke?”

“Judging by the shards and the integrity of the metal, it seemed like blunt force. Maybe another weapon. Thing is, there’s traces of magical energy along the damaged edges. A spell must have weakened the metal first.”

He frowned. Had it been broken in a fight—

“Surrender. You are outnumbered.”

His daggers lay in pieces, his magic has been suppressed, his body is struggling to hold itself up.

Lavellan sighs and hangs his head, slowly raising his arms in defeat.

He has failed.

Lavellan blinked the disorientation away, his entire body flushing with... shame? Anger? Frustration? He wasn’t certain.

Failed what?

“Thank you, Dagna,” he said instead and sheathed the daggers.

That memory was close to his death, it must have been. But why was it so... hazy? He couldn’t see who was speaking to him, couldn’t make sense of his surroundings.

“Your new armour is almost ready,” said Dagna. “Just need a few more modifications. It’ll definitely be done in time.”

Lavellan nodded and left the Undercroft, filled with a sudden unease. He gripped the daggers tighter and decided to head to the Apothecary for something to fill the vial with. Maybe extra healing potions instead of poisons. He wasn’t really in the cloak-and-dagger business anymore even if he was literally still carrying those items.

One week left.

“Vhenan?” Lavellan whispered in the darkness of the room, listening to Solas’ heartbeats beneath

his ear.

“Yes?”

Lavellan said nothing for a while, thoughts racing yet blank all at once, feeling the rise and fall of Solas’ chest beneath his head.

“Are you worried?” asked Solas.

“Very. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow.”

“It will be alright,” he soothed. “Our allies are capable, and your forces are more than ready and prepared. You have formulated a strong plan of attack.”

They were going to lose people tomorrow. On top of that, the problem with the Well was looming over his head. He wasn’t sure what he was going to find in the Temple.

At his silence, Solas said, “It is not just Corypheus you are worried about, is it?”

“I’m worried about a lot of things.”

Silence stretched between them.

“There is a question you have not asked me,” Solas murmured.

“I’m scared of the answer.”

What are your plans after this?

What does that mean for us?

He wasn’t ready for the answer. He doubted Solas even had an answer.

Was Solas a safe harbour again? How long would this last? Everything was so different, but everything was the same, and he could lose it all again but in a different way and there were only so many times you could break something before it stops putting itself back together again.

The Way of the Three Trees told them to bend but never break. Lavellan had proudly followed this tenet.

But how far did he have to keep bending?

Lavellan closed his eyes. “We should sleep. We have a long day ahead of us.”

Solas didn’t respond.

One night left.

They rode out in the morning.

They stopped in the Emerald Graves to make camp, and after helping get everything sorted, Lavellan bid Vergala to look for Clan Venalin. He'd already sent a letter a few weeks ago warning Clan Venalin to lay low because Corypheus' forces would likely go through the Graves too. He just wanted to make sure they were alright. He also wanted to give Revasha her pendant.

Once Vergala returned, he informed his advisors where he was going and rode out with Ellana and Solas. They followed Vergala through the forest until they spotted the red and gold sails of Clan Venalin's aravels. Lavellan let out a relieved sigh.

Ellana and Solas went on ahead to meet up with Keeper Hawen while Lavellan followed the sounds of ringing metal, the tiger pendant in his hand.

Lavellan found Revasha leading the drills. He leaned against a tree and waited, watching as she gave instructions to her hunters. Some had their vallaslins, some not. He smiled at their forms. They'd improved.

The drills soon concluded and Revasha dismissed everyone. She unstrung her bow and packed it away.

"Aisa," she said out loud, "I swear, if your babae finds out you've been sneaking off to watch drills —" She looked over her shoulder.

Lavellan waved.

She stared. Blinked. "Hahren?"

"Surprise?" He pushed off the tree and Revasha faced him fully, grinning.

"What the hell? When did you get here?" She eyed the cloak as he approached. "Hey, relax old man. Dirthamen's already got a stake on the ravens."

Lavellan laughed faintly. "He can come tell me off if he wants."

"You're just asking for a smiting now." She crossed her arms, still grinning. "Got your letter the other day. Thanks for the warning. And the advice."

"Did it help?"

"It did, actually. Felt awkward following it, but it got easier. Experience, I guess."

"I wanted to send the carving with the letter, but I wasn't able to finish it in time." He opened his hand and held out the pendant to her. Her eyes widened and she gently took it. "Thought I'd swing by quickly and give this to you."

"Thank you," she murmured, immediately putting it on, smiling softly. But she frowned again and looked up at him. "Wait, quickly?"

"We're staying here for the night but tomorrow..." He looked back at the general direction of the Arbor Wilds. "We're going to the Arbor Wilds."

"The Ar— But... There's a lot of old magic there. Why are you going there?"

"To stop the bad guys, I guess. Most of my forces are already there."

“Yeah, we noticed a few armies passing by, so we moved away. Couldn’t get out of the Graves yet, though. Too dangerous.”

“Good move.” He shook his head. “But anyway, we have a night. Why don’t you tell me about what you’ve all been up to?”

Revasha’s frown deepened, but she obliged his request and she talked as they walked back to the clan. Lavellan shared a few greetings once they reached the others, and Revasha and Ellana met soon after.

Ellana held out a fist. “Nice vallaslin.”

Revasha bumped it. “Thanks, you were partly the inspiration for it. Got any embarrassing stories about him?”

“Why is that the first thing people ask?” he grumbled.

Ellana opened her mouth. “He once—”

Lavellan clapped his hand over her mouth. She stomped on his foot and he yowled, instinctively grabbing it and hopping back.

“He once misfired an arrow and it pinned our Hahren’s robe just as he was bending over,” she said quickly. “Hanon’s bow got confiscated for two weeks.”

Revasha cackled and Lavellan groaned, covering his face at the memory. Solas patted his back without any real sympathy, a smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

Lavellan was able to forget about his worries momentarily while he spent the night with Clan Venalin. When he came to say goodbye in the morning, Keeper Hawen and the elders blessed them with a prayer for perseverance and strength.

Revasha hugged him briefly.

“Don’t die,” she said.

He hugged her back. “Don’t plan to. I’m proud of you, Vasha. You’re doing great.”

“Thank you,” Revasha whispered and stepped back. She noticed that her hunting charm was tied around his wrist and she smiled. “That’s not really a bow, hahren.”

He smiled back. “Still helps me keep my goals in sight.”

“You’re such a sap. It physically hurts me.”

“I got called Inquisitree because of it. Tree. Sap.”

“Oh yeah, Sera called you that.” She snorted, but her expression became solemn one more. “I mean it. Don’t die. Don’t—” She stopped herself.

Don’t leave me.

Lavellan's face fell.

"Hey," he said softly and reached into his pockets. He took out the grounding stone he'd been carrying with him ever since Haven and pressed it into her hands. She frowned at it. "Here. That stone's helped me through some tough times. Whenever I get distressed, I just... hold it, and I calm down. It's kind of important to me and I don't want to lose it in whatever's about to happen. Can you keep it safe for me?"

"I'm not your walking satchel," she scoffed, but she closed her hand around it anyway and held it close. "So you better come back and get it."

"Yes, Warleader."

"You're so annoying."

Lavellan laughed and flicked her nose, dodging her answering indignant kick. He waved everyone goodbye and rode back to the Inquisition's camp.

He'd expected to feel lost without his grounding stone, but he only felt a sense of purpose.

Solas glanced at him. "You've held onto it for all this time?"

"I haven't needed it lately, but yes, I still keep it in my pocket." He smiled. "It's been a while now. A year."

"A year," Solas repeated in slight disbelief. "How far we have come."

Lavellan fixed his gaze ahead.

How far they still had to go.

Lavellan secured the hunting charm around his wrist and urged his horse into a gallop.

They reached the Arbor Wilds at noon.

He spoke and organised with the agents and captains, overseeing the situation.

"We will not fail you, my lord," said one of his captains, saluting. "Andraste guide you."

The captain walked away. He heard Morrigan approach.

"I wonder," she said, standing beside him, "is it Andraste your soldiers invoke during battle or does a more immediate name come to their lips?"

He didn't respond. He already knew the answer.

"Ah," said Morrigan. "Perhaps you are already aware of it."

"It's not as if I can stop them, no matter how much I hate it." He stared at the lush greenery of the Wilds, exotic species of plants and animals rampant in the area, untouched by human hands. Ancient magic was still thick in the air, and some part of him was associating it with home.

Vergala circled the skies above them. "It's peaceful here," he murmured.

Morrigan scanned the area with him. "Yes, there is a beauty to it. Unspoilt. Though 'twould be best to remain wary. The Wilds have lain untouched for a reason."

The Well seemed restless in his head. He wasn't sure if it was due to excitement, anxiety, or something else.

"If your scouts report accurately," said Morrigan, "I believe the ruins that Corypheus is approaching to be the Temple of Mythal."

"And a temple like that would definitely have more than enough eluvians."

A series of explosions further within the forest caught his attention and he scowled.

"We need to get going soon," he muttered. "Before any more of the forest is destroyed from the fighting."

He parted from her with a small nod and finally unpacked the new armour Dagna had given him, going into a tent to don it.

The new breast plate held the iridescent sheen of veil quartz, and the leather of the coat and gloves appeared to be made of dragon scales. He laughed breathlessly. Dagna and Harritt never cease to amaze him.

Lavellan stepped out, putting the raven cloak back on, ready for battle.

"Are you planning to take flight?" asked a familiar voice behind him.

He grinned and faced an unmasked Briala, who was garbed in leather and silverite armour, daggers hanging from her hips.

"I wish," he said. "You, however, have made good on your promise to fly."

"Ah, you received my letter."

"I'd meant to send a response earlier, but I got distracted. Preparations and all. I hope your being here hasn't taken you away from anything important?"

They walked through camp as they conversed.

"No," she said. "Besides, it's a relief to see where the blades are coming from this time. My neck is sore from looking over my shoulders all the time."

"How have you been managing with the limited eluvians? I heard from a certain someone that you've been very determined."

"He said that, did he? I'm flattered." She watched the colourful parrots take flight with a small smile. "We're managing. Three, twenty, or zero eluvians, it doesn't matter. He can take it all if he wants. That won't stop us from fighting."

"I can try to negotiate with him to open more eluvians. To safehouses at least. In case anybody needs shelter."

She glanced at him. "How agreeable would he be to this?"

“Not sure. I could still try. We’ve been on... better terms, lately.”

“Are you now?” asked Briala, something teasing in her tone.

“You’re very insufferable sometimes.”

“Thank you.”

More explosions sounded from within the forest. The levity of their demeanours dropped, and they shared a serious look.

“Good luck, Inquisitor,” said Briala.

“Take care, Marquise. We’ll talk later.”

Lavellan made his final arrangements, before he gathered his inner circle.

“We need to push our way through,” said Lavellan. “Morrigan says Corypheus is headed towards the Temple of Mythal, and we need to catch up to him.”

“Our forces will make a path for you,” said Cullen.

Lavellan unsheathed his daggers and stared into the heart of the Arbor Wilds.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

chanting Arbor Wilds, Arbor Wilds

Anyway, Solas finally answers what the hell is up with the end of the world thing.
(Watch DA4 nuke the lore here when it's released)

(Yo, I've missed Dorian, Vasha, and Briala)

The sorrowful defender

Chapter Notes

I am a mature person who will not laugh at this chapter number

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

protector of a fallen world

The sounds of ringing metal, explosions, and battle cries replaced the birdsong within the forest.

The Inquisition had done a good job of weakening Corypheus' forces prior to the Arbor Wilds, so they were scattered and disjointed, easily cut down by the combined might of the Inquisition and the Orlesian army.

And so, they marched on, ever deeper.

In between the fighting, Lavellan could admire the beauty of the Wilds. He looked up at the trees. The sun here felt sharper, warmer, and the air was humid — a climate incongruous to its geographical location. This far south was usually colder.

Lavellan walked astride Solas, who was taking the forest in with a grim severity.

"Have you been here before?" Lavellan asked, keeping his voice low.

"On numerous occasions. It... Much of the temple has fallen, but the forest remains mostly unchanged." He frowned. "It is mildly jarring. I am not certain how I feel about it."

"The forest feels alive," said Lavellan. "The Veil is weaker here."

"I am unsurprised. Even back in Elvhenan, this location had a stronger connection to the Beyond. It is why Mythal has chosen to build her most important temple here."

"You've been saying the Fade and the Beyond. I assume they're not interchangeable?"

"No. Not fundamentally." One of the wolves on his staff came undone and he retied it. "The Fade is a state; the Beyond is a realm. A mage would manipulate the Fade to cast their spells. Since the creation of the Veil forced the Fade and the Beyond to merge, the mages now manipulate the Veil so that it manipulates the Fade by proxy."

"Kind of like puppets on strings?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But it is still a limited degree of control. Mechanical movements as opposed to an organic orchestration."

Lavellan hesitated, but asked his next question anyway. "And if the Veil falls?"

He'd felt himself reconnecting to the Fade during that final battle as the Veil had steadily deteriorated, though he hadn't known it then.

“Then the Fade would bleed back into the physical realm,” said Solas. “But when you release the string of a drawn bow, does it not hurt if the string were to hit your arm?”

“Would bruise like hell,” he muttered, recalling the times he’d held the bow incorrectly and the string had thwacked against his forearm. “So there would be a backlash of sorts when that happens?” Was that what would drive the non-elven mad? It would upend their state of being, after all.

Lavellan couldn’t bring himself to ask that next question. And it seemed he didn’t have to because Vergala cawed twice above them and they came across another localised battle.

It was the Venatori and the Red Templars, but they weren’t battling the Inquisition or the Orlesian army.

Lavellan’s eyes widened.

The Sentinels.

“Should we interfere, Inquisitor?” asked Cassandra.

“We have no choice,” he said. “This is the only path to the temple.”

“Now maybe I’ve been concussed and hadn’t realised it,” said Dorian, “but I believe those elves look a mite bigger than usual, wouldn’t you say?”

“Perhaps they are the defenders of the temple,” said Vivienne.

“Do your best not to harm them,” said Lavellan. He received a chorus of affirmations.

They leapt into the fight. Lavellan focused on cutting down the mages, using his cloak to nullify minor fireballs or bolts of lightning or lances of ice. Solas’ barrier deflected the more dangerous spells.

One of the Tevinter swordsmen crept up behind him.

Cassandra bashed them out of the way.

He nodded at her in thanks, gaze momentarily falling on Dirthamen’s shield in her hand. He ripped his gaze away.

One of the Behemoths had cornered a Sentinel.

Lavellan shot forward with his hook and chain and, landed on its back, and stabbed between the lyrium into the vulnerable areas. The Behemoth screeched and tried to shake him off its back.

The Sentinel swept in with their daggers and delivered a succession of slashes.

Lavellan leapt off. The Behemoth fell, sending up a cloud of dust.

A blur moved in his periphery.

Lavellan lunged away. Just in time to dodge the Sentinel’s slash.

“Wait!” said Lavellan. “We’re not here to—”

Slash. He dodged again.

The other remaining Sentinels attacked the rest of his companions.

“Uh, Mercy?” asked Bull, throwing a Sentinel off him.

“Piss, why’re they *big*?” shrieked Sera.

“*Wait*,” Lavellan hissed at the Sentinel attacking him. “[Ar'an garir atisha](#).^[1]”

The Sentinel faltered briefly, glancing at Lavellan’s cloak. They were wearing a mask and hood so Lavellan could only see their eyes. Eyes which widened. Then narrowed.

“[Rodhair](#).^[2]!” they hissed and lunged at him.

Lavellan dodged their strikes, gritting his teeth. Too fast.

“[Ar tel'nuvenan nua na](#).^[3]” he said.

It was no use.

“Mages, put them to sleep!” Lavellan yelled.

A huge wave of combined magic swept through the area. The Sentinels staggered back.

And collapsed.

Lavellan pursed his lips, staring down at the sleeping Sentinel. They’d recognised the cloak, but they must have thought he’d stolen it. He shook his head and faced his team.

“Let’s keep going.”

“We cannot continue casting sleeping spells for these elves, Inquisitor,” said Morrigan. “Such a spell is taxing, and we must be careful with our mana.”

“I— Yes, okay.” He frowned to himself. “We try to bypass them then.”

“If that proves unsuccessful?” she asked.

Lavellan glanced at Solas.

Solas gave a resigned shake of his head. Lavellan took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“We kill them.”

They managed to bypass the second group since the Sentinels were too focused on the Venatori, but Lavellan had no choice for the third group.

“Ir abelas,” he whispered as he closed in on the Sentinel. “You’ve done well.”

He slit their throat.

Lavellan forced himself to keep moving.

A few of his friends gave him reassuring pats on the back. Ellana was quiet. Lavellan squeezed her shoulder. Solas kept his chin up, but he paused and knelt beside one of the Sentinels. He murmured something, then rose.

Lavellan stood beside him, hung his head. "I'm sorry."

He sighed heavily. "It cannot be helped. They have their duty, and we have ours. But... thank you."

They continued, but Ellana tugged Lavellan back by the cloak and dragged him to the back of the group.

"You need to take the cloak off," she murmured.

He blinked. "Why?"

"Why— It was literally made to be recognisable!" she hissed softly. "You keep getting recognised by the Sentinels."

"They think I stole it."

"It doesn't matter what they think you did with it. It's still announcing that the creepy face changer they grew up hearing stories about is around in some way. Isha'belsal'in to Elvhen children is what Fen'Harel is to Dalish children."

Lavellan sighed, stepping over a tree root. "It won't fit in anyone's pack."

"Why didn't you just leave it at Skyhold?"

"Because it had a practical use..." He paused. "And I don't want to part with it again."

"I understand that, but I also think you're an idiot." She rubbed her face. "Can't you turn it inside out? So the feathers aren't facing out, at least?"

"Fine," he grumbled and worked on rearranging it. "The hood's going to look weird."

"You don't need the hoo— Sweet Sylaise, grant me patience." She lightly knocked her head against her staff. "Your head's been fried from worrying and planning for this campaign."

Lavellan scowled, resealing the now inside-out cloak.

"You two alright?" asked Bull, slowing so they could catch up with him. He looked at Lavellan's cloak and frowned in confusion. "Uh... huh?"

Ellana waved a hand. "The feathers were offending me."

Bull laughed. "Thought it was badass."

"And now I just look like a fool," said Lavellan.

"You always look like a fool," said Ellana.

Their banter and levity faded as they noticed that they were nearing a looming monument which contested the trees in height. A large archway beckoned, leading into a tall, shadowed hall. Lavellan's expression turned grave.

They were here.

Lavellan faced the others, counting their numbers.

“This is where we split up,” he said. “I need a team to help the soldiers, and another team to go in the temple with me.” He listed the members of each team and nodded after, regarding everyone.

“Alright, you know what to do. Stay safe.”

“You too, Inquisitor,” said Dorian.

That team backtracked to help the soldiers and fend off the enemy while Lavellan faced his team and smiled faintly.

“It’s us again, huh?” he asked. Cassandra, Varric, and Solas. With the addition of Morrigan and Ellana.

“A whole lot less snow and demons and holes in the sky,” remarked Varric, smiling back.

“But now we get the darkspawn fossil.”

“Good thing I’ve already seen him before.”

“You’re about to get real up close and personal again,” he said.

“Andraste’s ass, once was enough,” said Varric, and they walked in. “Also, why is your cloak like that?”

“I dared him to,” said Ellana. The long stretch of the dark corridor swallowed their voices, denying them their echo.

How eerie.

“Be ready,” said Solas. “Corypheus will be there.”

Lavellan’s expression hardened and he nodded. They crossed the long stretch of the corridor in silence after that. Lavellan’s blood rushed in his ears.

The end of the corridor led to a balcony. Dead Red Templars and Venatori littered the ground, their corpses riddled with arrows. Below them, Corypheus and his small retinue of soldiers along with Samson and Calpernia faced off against another group of Sentinels. Lavellan crouched behind the railings.

“They are but remnants,” said Corypheus. “They will not keep us from the Well of Sorrows.”

Lavellan clenched his jaw, refraining from jumping over the railing to personally send Corypheus into the Void. Beside him, Morrigan made a soft noise of confusion.

Corypheus advanced towards the Sentinels. “Be honoured! Witness death at the hands of a new god!”

He was so fucking pretentious.

Corypheus stepped foot onto the bridge.

The giant structures on either side glowed blue and shot a violent stream of magic at Corypheus. The Sentinels and Corypheus’ forces backed away.

Corypheus struggled against the stream of magic, forcing himself to take a step forward. He grabbed the nearest Sentinel by the face and lifted them, their legs kicking and squirming. Lavellan rose.

Solas grabbed his arm and forced him back down.

A low whine filled the air.

Corypheus disintegrated slowly, flesh peeling back to reveal bone.

The air pulsed.

Then exploded.

Lavellan closed his eyes and turned away from the flood of light, the sweet lightning of magic and acidity of burnt flesh filling his nose.

Once the light dimmed, everyone took a tentative look.

Samson and Calpernia's forces were already crossing the bridge, the Sentinels dead from the resulting blast. Corypheus was nowhere to be found.

"Shit," muttered Varric. "Is he...? It can't be that easy."

They descended into the lower area. Lavellan kept his eyes peeled for the body of a Grey Warden

—

There.

The body twitched.

"Bridge," he said urgently. "Across the bridge, *now!*"

Cassandra frowned. "What—"

The corpse rose, jerking in irregular movements. It threw its head back, black gushing from its orifices, ligaments snapping, rearranging, forming the familiar shape of Corypheus.

"It cannot be!" said Morrigan, eyes wide.

"*Bridge!*" Lavellan barked and ushered their shocked selves forward. They snapped out of it and sprinted.

Corypheus rose, flesh still reforming, eyes aglow with crimson. He shrieked.

And the blighted dragon coasted over the trees, screeching, headed for them.

They reached the large, open doors at the end of the bridge and slowly pushed it close. The heavy stones grated against the tiled floors. The shadow of the dragon loomed.

Lavellan put more force into his push.

Fire gushed forth from the dragon's maw.

Heat licked at Lavellan's cheek—

They pushed the doors closed and it glowed. The fire hit it from outside, but the magic would hold.

Lavellan leaned back against the door, mildly breathless.

“What the fuck was that?” cried Ellana. “He physically reformed that corpse into... *him*.”

“You said we were here for an eluvian,” Varric said to Morrigan. “What’s the Well of Sorrows?”

Morrigan scratched the back of her head. “I... am uncertain.”

Lavellan pushed off the door. “Our objective hasn’t changed. Whatever it is he’s searching for, we won’t let him have it. Let’s go.”

They continued, soon reaching the sanctum’s courtyard. Sunlight fell in gentle bursts over the ground, the golden tiles on the path gleaming.

“What I want to know is how Corypheus returned to life,” said Morrigan. “We saw him *die*.”

The others discussed Corypheus’ supposed immortality, but Lavellan wasn’t able to pay them any attention because the Well of Sorrows’ whispering briefly surged into a roar. Lavellan grimaced. The beginnings of a headache knocked at the back of his head.

By the time the Well quieted, they had reached the main vestibule.

Morrigan and Lavellan ascended the small elevated platform, and the wrought iron tiles on the platform glowed blue once they stepped on it. In front of them were two large stones covered in Elvish inscription. Lavellan was able to read it with ease.

“Atish’all vir’abelasan,” said Solas, coming up to stand beside him. The tiles’ blue glow flickered in his eyes. “Enter the path of the Well of Sorrows.”

“There is something about knowledge,” murmured Morrigan, squinting at the stone. “Respectful or pure. Shiven. Shivennen...” She shook her head. “‘Tis is all I can translate. That it mentions the Well is a good omen.”

Solas shot Lavellan a look and subtly shook his head.

Ellana had a look at it as well and frowned. “This is very ancient text. A different dialect too, I think. That might be why it’s harder to translate. Eternal... sleep? Something lost?”

Lavellan read it, the words and their intention settling in his head.

Enter the path of the Well of Sorrows. For those who seek its depths, a great boon bestowed, but a cost to be seized. Within your final breaths, rest, revel in the sweet sacrifice of duty. Eternal life for eternal rest, and purity of knowledge dwelling deep. Lost yet kept forevermore.

There were a lot of conceptual words. No wonder it was difficult to translate. And Ellana was right, this was not written in the main Arlathanian dialect.

Lavellan completed the ritual of obeisance, moving over the wrought iron tiles, before they split up and explored the area in search of an entrance.

Solas pulled Lavellan aside briefly.

“I do not trust her,” Solas murmured. “She lies. If she was able to understand and translate ‘knowledge’, then she is equipped to handle the others. Be careful.”

“You couldn’t have translated it yourself for us?”

He shook his head. "It would invite her further scrutiny and questions I would rather not field." He smiled. "Though I *am* aware of what it truly says. Would you like to hear it?"

Well, he already knew but it was best to keep up appearances. "Yes, please."

Solas translated it for him, a few variations here in there, but the intent remained largely the same.

"I'll keep an eye on her," promised Lavellan. Morrigan had no malicious intent, but at the same time, Lavellan still didn't know her that well. He may have worked with her briefly, but that was more of a business partnership over a friendship.

They joined the search for the entrance then stumbled upon the Fen'Harel statue that Morrigan and Ellana had found. Lavellan watched in amusement as Solas and Morrigan argued.

But Solas seemed genuinely grieved so Lavellan stepped in.

"We'll discuss this later when we're not trying to stop a fossil with a god complex," he said. "Come on."

"Indeed," said Morrigan, clipped.

It was Varric who found the entrance, and he hollered for them to come over. Morrigan walked away at the call, but Solas lingered by the statue, staring at it with an indiscernible expression.

"Are you alright?" Lavellan asked softly.

"The wolf has long since been seen as a symbol of protection," said Solas, "so I had thought it fitting to occasionally take on its form during battles. It had inspired my soldiers." He watched one of the colourful birds flying past. "And later, I was called Fen'Harel as a mockery. The Rebel Wolf. A twisted irony and a belittlement, as if to claim that I am no true protector and that I am but a child throwing a tantrum. The Dread Wolf was a new meaning. Bestowed upon me by the Dalish."

He turned and smiled grimly at Lavellan.

"The Evanuris' efforts to villainise me has succeeded," he said. "When the whole world wishes you to be a certain way, what power do you have against the strength of such a tide?"

Lavellan looked down, understanding too well, but—

"You're not a villain," he murmured.

"Am I not? I am already one in Dalish tales. Whomever outsmarts me in the story is seen as a hero. That would be you, would it not? The hero of the tale?"

Lavellan's gaze snapped up and he glared at Solas. "I don't want to fight you," he said heatedly. "I will not make you my villain." *Not again.*

His gaze saddened. "What if you must?"

"I refuse. I will save you from yourself, if I must, but I will *never* see you as a villain. Because you're not." He cradled Solas' face and looked into his eyes resolutely. "I don't care what the world says. I believe you have a good heart. There *must* be another way, and I'm willing to look for it together with you."

Solas stared back at him, eyes widening slightly, before he lowered his gaze. His shoulders fell.

The reaction sent Lavellan's stomach sinking. Solas may have told him the truth, but that wasn't a guarantee that he still wouldn't pursue his original goals.

If that happened...

Lavellan wasn't sure if he could stand again after that.

No, he had to try harder.

But that was for later. He let go of Solas and grabbed his hand instead, tugging him towards the others, heart burning with resolve.

He had to get his memories back. Maybe he knew of something that could help.

They reunited with the others. Lavellan whistled for Vergala, and she followed them as they entered the temple. They caught up to Samson and Calpernia, the two mid-argument, but they stopped upon having noticed their arrival.

"Don't let them through," ordered Calpernia. She turned and went down a tunnel, Samson following close behind.

Lavellan's team fought against the Venatori and Red Templars that remained.

After their victory, Cassandra geared to follow the two lieutenants through the tunnel.

Lavellan held her back. "Wait," he said. "We mustn't rush through. We don't know this area very well."

"Indeed," said Morrigan, and suggested that they follow the petitioner's path instead of following.

Lavellan was already planning on it, but he pulled her aside regardless so they could have a discussion and subtly remind her that he wanted complete honesty from her. Morrigan was hungry for the Well and its knowledge, that much was apparent.

You wouldn't want it if you knew who it would tie you to.

They returned to the main group afterwards, his mind already made.

"We're going down the petitioner's path," Lavellan said to the others. "This place is ancient, and there are too many unknowns. I know we're in a hurry but being disrespectful may land us in trouble later."

Cassandra sighed. "This does not sit well with me but... by your orders."

"What did I say?" asked Solas.

"Don't hook and chain to the Fen'Harel statue," grumbled Lavellan.

"And what did you do?"

"Hooked and chained to the Fen'Harel statue."

“And what did I say would happen?”

“That I would fall on my back and hurt myself and reset the puzzle.”

“And what happened?”

Lavellan paused, then grinned up at him. “I hit my head instead and I solved the puzzle. You were wrong.”

Solas sighed.

Upon the completion of the rituals, they opened the large doors into an even larger chamber, though it stood empty.

“‘Tis not what I expected,” said Morrigan, scanning the chamber. “What was this used for?”

“Faronel,” Vergala squawked on his shoulder. Lavellan frowned at her. Faronel?

They made their way across the chamber, footsteps echoing. Too quiet.

He could feel eyes on him.

“We have company,” he murmured, and looked back over his shoulders. A line of Sentinels stood in front of the door, bows drawn.

His group huddled closer, defensive, postures tense. Cornered.

“[Venavis^{\[4\]}](#),” said a familiar voice.

Abelas.

Lavellan turned and looked up at the dais.

There he stood, studying their group with sharp, golden eyes. His scrutiny lingered briefly on Solas, before finally landing on Lavellan.

Abelas stayed quiet for an uncomfortably long time.

Nobody else moved or spoke, too aware of the arrows pointed at their backs.

“Faronel,” said Vergala again, breaking the standstill.

Abelas' stern expression eased slightly at what Vergala had said. Solas stared at Vergala, eyes narrowing slightly.

They both recognised it. But why? What was she saying? What the hell was a Faronel?

“What is your connection to the other invaders?” Abelas finally asked.

This was strange.

“They are our enemies,” said Lavellan. “And yours.”

Abelas fell quiet once more.

“Who are you?” Ellana asked before another prolonged silence could settle.

He glanced at her. “I am called Abelas. We are Sentinels, tasked with standing against those who trespass on sacred ground. We wake only to fight, to preserve this place. Our numbers diminish with every invasion.” He stared right at Lavellan. “And I know what you seek. You wish to drink from the vir’abelasan.”

“He speaks of the Well!” said Morrigan.

Abelas scowled at her. “It is not *for* you.” He glanced at Lavellan again. “What do they call you?”

“They call me Inquisitor.”

“That is a title. What of your name?”

Lavellan paused. Abelas hadn’t bothered to ask for his name before.

“Mahanon,” he said tentatively, eyeing him. “Lavellan.”

Abelas straightened, expression turning grim. “You wish to reach the Well?”

“I— Yes. Our enemy seeks it, and we seek to stop him.”

“Inquisitor,” murmured Morrigan, “you must stop Corypheus, yes? But you may also need the Well for your own.”

He might. And he still had to question Abelas about a few things regarding the Well. He could only hope that Abelas would deign to answer his questions.

“Abelas,” said Lavellan, “we apologise for trespassing upon the sanctum, but we have done our best to be respectful. We have followed the petitioner’s path, and we have tried to spare what Sentinels we could.”

Abelas regarded him for another drawn out moment. What was with this silence?

Did... he recognise Lavellan? It was likely the cloak. Fuck, Ellana was right, he *should* have left it back at Skyhold, but putting it on had become a habit and he wasn’t aware he was doing it half the time. Maybe his mind *did* get fried from all the worrying. Turning the cloak inside-out probably wasn’t even that effective. He just looked like an idiot now.

“I wish to speak with you,” said Abelas. “Alone.”

Lavellan shared a hesitant look with Ellana. This was new. Again.

“Why...?” he asked.

“You are not in danger,” said Abelas. “And you will not be. You have followed the rites of petition and have shown respect to Mythal. I will grant the same hospitality in return.”

Lavellan let out a breath. “Alright. Can I... take my bird?”

He could have sworn Abelas just smiled, but he couldn’t picture Abelas smiling. He didn’t seem like the smiling kind of guy. Maybe Lavellan had hit his head too hard when he had fallen off the Fen’Harel statue.

“You may,” said Abelas and left the dais through a corridor nearby. Lavellan was about to ask how he was supposed to follow, but a portion of the wall to the side of the room glowed and vanished, revealing a hidden passageway.

Lavellan looked back at the others.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

“I do not like the sound of this,” said Cassandra. “It could be a trap.”

“I *am* uneasy,” he said, “but I don’t think anything malicious is going on. Just... stay put for now.”

He stared at the revealed passageway, then walked into it. The wall solidified behind him. Lavellan looked back, touching his hand to the wall, but it remained solid. He pursed his lips and kept going instead.

The corridor was linear and unremarkable enough, and his stomach wrung tighter with every step he took. The fire from the braziers cast flickering light over the tiled walls as he passed.

What was that? Abelas had acted strangely. He couldn’t recall their last encounter well, but he was certain it hadn’t gone like *that*. Certainly not this. Abelas had tolerated them at best.

“Shadows wearing vallaslin? You are not my people.”

That had stung.

“Faronel,” said Vergala again.

“That’s gotten me a few weird looks, Gala. What’s a Faronel?”

She didn’t get the chance to reply because the corridor finally ended, leading to a smaller room. Abelas was already there, waiting in the middle of the room with his back turned and his hands clasped behind his back.

His head tilted slightly upon hearing Lavellan approach.

“I had hoped,” said Abelas, his voice echoing in the small space, “but it seems fortune will not smile upon me today.”

Lavellan frowned. What?

“Asunara had informed me that you would arrive soon,” he continued and Lavellan’s eyes widened.

Abelas turned and bowed his head, fell to one knee. Lavellan’s breath faltered.

“It is a great honour to see you again, Ras’virelan.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not a mature person and I laughed at this chapter number. Many times.

Mate, the problem I have with canon quest and storylines is balancing new content

with game content and figuring out which parts to skip. *bangs head against the wall*
So I'm terribly sorry if the chapter's a bit subpar today.

Anyway, what's a Faronel?

Translation

[1] **Ar'an garir atisha:** We come in peace [\[1\]](#)

[2] **Rodhair:** Thief [\[1\]](#)

[3] **Ar tel'nuvenan nua na:** I don't want to hurt you [\[1\]](#)

[4] **Venavis:** (An idiom) No further; Only continue if you are content to lose (lit. walk if) [\[1\]](#)

Unto greater depths

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint! :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

listen

Lavellan stared at Abelas, who wasn't showing signs of rising any time soon.

"Wait," said Lavellan. "I'm—I'm lost. Please stand, I really don't think you should be kneeling to me."

"Kneeling is not enough. I owe you innumerable apologies."

"I'm not even sure *why* you owe me apologies."

Abelas reluctantly stood, expression grave. Lavellan had to take a moment to get used to Abelas' height this close.

A part of him noted that Dirthamen was still taller than Abelas.

"You truly do not recall me?" asked Abelas.

Lavellan frowned. He recalled Abelas from the past timeline, but... nothing from his time as Ras.

"Faronel!" Vergala said again. "Friend!"

Friend?

Abelas lowered his gaze, as if shamed. Lavellan frowned deeper, taking a tentative step closer, looking at Abelas' eyes.

"Wait..." Lavellan murmured. He grabbed the edge of his cloak and pulled it up. "Just stand still for a moment." He held it up over the lower half of Abelas' face so that only his eyes were visible. Golden eyes looked at him, a little worn and weary, but still burning with a resolute tenacity.

They were... familiar.

"What is your name?"

"I have none."

"What is your purpose?"

"Of that, I also have none. I am lost, a sword without an arm to wield it, a shield with nothing to defend."

Lavellan offers his hand. "Would you like a new purpose?"

"Will you name me?"

Lavellan stares at him. Vedir has taken to calling him My Friend since he's refused to choose a name and has requested to be given time to think of it. Everyone simply calls him My Friend or Friend during the five years he's served as their defender. Friend escorts the others on missions, lurking in the shadows and watching over them.

"You don't wish to find a name for yourself?" asks Lavellan.

"I would be honoured to be named by you," says Friend. He's taken to keeping the El'amelan's mask on most of the time. When asked about it, he merely explains that it is the uniform.

"Very well," says Lavellan. "Give me some time to think about it. Although, I will warn you that I am terrible at naming things."

"I shall treasure it regardless."

Lavellan laughs. "The right response was: You're not terrible at naming things."

"I do not wish to lie to you," says Friend, eyes squinting mildly in mischief.

"I think I've found a name for you," says Lavellan, smiling. It's taken him several weeks. He wants it to be deserving of Friend. Dirthamen may or may not have lain witness to Lavellan fretting over the right choice.

Friend kneels and bows his head. "I am ready to receive it, Ras'virelan."

"You have been a dear friend, an enduring soul, and a formidable warrior," says Lavellan. "[Falon, rosasha, panelan.](#)^[1]"

Lavellan offers his hand once more.

"Rise, Faronel."

Lavellan lowered the cape, eyes widening as the memories returned.

"Faronel," Lavellan breathed.

He hung his head. "Forgive me, Ras, but I am no longer worthy of that name. I shed Faronel when I failed you and chose a new name once I entered Mythal's service. I shed that name when I failed her as well. Now I will only be known by the sorrow that cuts my heart."

Lavellan's gaze saddened. "What happened?" he asked softly.

"Do you remember the circumstances regarding your death?"

Lavellan shook his head.

“Then I cannot tell you,” said Abelas. “Asunara had cautioned me against it. Know only that the darkest grief had overcome the El’ras’amelan, and that it would have made the darkness of the Void look as though it were a sun.”

Lavellan’s face fell at the despondence hidden beneath the steady voice Abelas was trying to maintain.

“What happened to the El’amelan after I died?” he asked. “And the others...? You and Asunara are still around. What about the others?”

“To my knowledge, Asunara and I are the only remaining members of the El’ras’amelan. After your death, we all strived to heed your final message to us.”

His message?

At his confusion, Abelas said, “You requested that we forego vengeance, and instead dedicate ourselves to the protection of the world and its people. We went our separate paths to fulfill the request in whatever way we can. Some like Bel’veidir and Asunara wished to make sure the world will not completely forget you. Some remained with Dirthamen. Some, like I, chose to serve another god. Some I have never heard from again.”

Vengeance? Lavellan rubbed his eyes. He had so many questions, and very little time to ask them.

“You’ve made contact with Asunara?” he asked instead.

“Yes. She visited while I slumbered to return my memories prior to our reversal of time. She then informed me of your return and lack of recollection.”

Lavellan’s brows raised. So Abelas had helped with the time reversal. Lavellan had lost track of Abelas after their journey to the Arbor Wilds the first time, but he’d assumed Abelas had joined Solas since a few Sentinels had also sided with him.

Maybe he *had* joined Solas, then had come to the same realisation as Asunara. That Solas had been on a path of ruination, not restoration.

“So you know I already have the Well,” said Lavellan.

“Yes.”

“What’s the situation with it?”

“It is empty.”

Lavellan stared at him. “Empty?” he echoed in disbelief.

“Not in a physical sense,” said Abelas. “The water and some of its magic remains, but *you* have the knowledge within it.”

He passed a hand over his face. “What are the implications of this? Do the other Sentinels know?”

“No,” he murmured. “I have not told them. We have nothing left but our duty. I do not want to discourage them.”

Lavellan looked away, pained. “They’re dying. To protect something that isn’t even here.”

“I, more than anyone, know the aimlessness of losing your purpose. Of failing your duty. I will not

take this from them.”

Lavellan said nothing, only stared at the floor with a clenched jaw.

Another muffled explosion sounded in the distance and caught their attention. Lavellan turned his head towards the source of the sound with a grim press to his lips. He turned back to Abelas.

“We’re running out of time,” he said. “The Well may be empty now, but I still need it to retrieve my memories from Elvhenan. I need information on the Void magic that the Evanuris had used against the Titans. I must have known something about it. Do you know if this is possible?”

Abelas put a hand to his mouth in thought. “I believe so. First, you must understand how the vir’abelasan works. It is made of magic and knowledge, stored within a physical vessel. The magic is a mixture of Mythal’s and Dirthamen’s, and each serves a different function.” He glanced at Lavellan. “You would be familiar with how Dirthamen’s magic operates. It condenses and preserves the knowledge.”

Lavellan nodded slowly. “It’s the same mechanism as the secrets. I assume it’s gentler since it doesn’t have to withstand being passed from vessel to vessel. What about Mythal’s magic?”

“It is the magic which allows new knowledge to flow into the vir’abelasan.” He paused. “And allows her to exert influence over you. The magic still remaining in the temple is Mythal’s.”

So Dirthamen’s magic allowed preservation, and Mythal’s allowed inheritance (and control).

“When a servant of Mythal passes on their knowledge,” said Abelas, “everything is taken — their memories, their knowledge — so that they may be purified before entering uthenera. To give to the vir’abelasan is to lay yourself bare. No magic could ever obscure any piece of knowledge or secret from it.” He gave Lavellan a meaningful look. “No magic, no matter how powerful.”

The gears in Lavellan’s head turned. “If I were to... pass my knowledge and memories on?”

“It would join the collective knowledge within the vessel.”

And the vessel was Lavellan.

“I’ll be able to access my memories.” Lavellan paced the room, chewing on his bottom lip. “My *knowledge*. Thousands of years’ worth of magical and martial knowledge. Even my time in the Beyond and the Fade. I could find out what happened after my death, how I ended up being born as a Dalish.” Excitement sparked in his chest. He stopped pacing and faced Abelas with a determined look. “How do I do it?”

Abelas’ look turned troubled.

Lavellan frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I am loyal to you... but I am also sworn to Mythal. The vir’abelasan is our final reminder of what once was, and only those who have toiled in Mythal’s favour receives the honour of passing on their knowledge or receiving from the Well.”

“I think,” said Lavellan, voice dark and displeased, “that I’ve toiled enough in her favour. I looked after her empire; I brought her Wolf to heel after he started seeing red; I’m still looking after the elves.”

An icy silence washed over the room. Abelas still looked torn.

“We must protect it,” Abelas said.

“The Well is already with me.”

Another explosion. Lavellan’s agitation mounted and Vergala shifted on his shoulders as if sensing it.

“Abelas, we both have people out there dying by the second,” said Lavellan. “We need to come to an agreement.”

“If I were to refuse?”

“Then Corypheus’ forces won’t relent. Not until they get their hands on the vir’abelasan. It may be empty, but what do you think will happen when he finds out? You think he’ll just *leave*?”

Lavellan’s expression fell. “I finally found another one of the El’amelan. I don’t want you to die so soon.”

Abelas smiled sadly. “You do not even know me. You still look at me as though I am a stranger.”

“You are one of mine,” he said fiercely. “I may not remember you or most of the El’amelan very well, but in my heart, I *know*.”

He cast his gaze down remorsefully. “You still say such things in spite of my failure to protect the People.”

“The People still persist.” Lavellan put his hand to his chest. “*We* persist. We are not shadows, not pale imitations. We are something entirely new, yet we are still connected. Different branches from the same tree.”

Abelas didn’t answer. He turned away instead.

“To impart your knowledge upon the vir’abelasan you must accept Mythal’s magic,” said Abelas. It was a topic change, but Lavellan had neither time nor energy to go on another diatribe, so he let it slide. “Do you understand the implications of this?”

The geas.

Lavellan’s mouth dried and his heart raced, but he took a deep breath.

“It’s the price I’m willing to pay,” Lavellan said.

“I trust you understand the weight of the cost.”

Lavellan recalled the cold burn of a blade through his heart.

“More than anyone,” he said.

Abelas nodded. “Very well.”

With that agreement, they made their way back through the corridor Lavellan had gone through. Every step Lavellan took felt heavy with responsibility.

“Does Fen’Harel know?” asked Abelas.

“No,” Lavellan murmured. “Not yet. He doesn’t remember Ras, either. Do you know what happened?”

“I saw him once, just before the beginning of my service to Mythal. We were discussing my decision to change my name. I have not spoken to him since.” He hummed in thought. “But he recalled you, then. He was grieving, just as we were.”

Lavellan ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “What happened to him? I don’t understand. He’s so confident about his recollection of past events.” He shook his head. “A problem for later.”

“Perhaps Asunara will have insight.”

“That’s true.”

The quiet returned, their footsteps echoing in the corridor. Lavellan fell back into his thoughts. Was Solas lying to him about knowing Ras? No, Lavellan could tell he was being truthful.

“But Dirthamen betrayed us...”

What happened after Lavellan had died?

“Were Solas and Dirthamen on good terms after I died?” asked Lavellan.

“I apologise, I have not had any further contact with them after I started my duties as a Sentinel. I cannot answer that reliably.”

“Right...”

Vergala pushed her head against his cheek as if to reassure him. Lavellan smiled and scratched the underside of her beak.

“I have been meaning to ask,” said Abelas. “Why is your cloak inside-out?”

Lavellan sighed and fixed it. “I forgot it made me recognisable among the Elvhen. Hiding the feathers was the best I could do to minimise being recognised by the Sentinels and accidentally tipping my friends off.”

They finally reached the end of the corridor. Abelas tapped the wall and it glowed, vanishing to reveal the chamber. His companions were in the middle of a hushed conversation, but they immediately stopped and looked up at their arrival.

“I will lead you to the vir’abelasan,” said Abelas as they walked forward and faced Lavellan’s companions. Morrigan nodded, pleased. “On one condition.” He looked at Lavellan. “He is the only one who may drink.”

“What?” Morrigan and Solas asked in unison.

Solas shot Lavellan an alarmed look and Lavellan could only fiddle with the hunting charm around his wrist, unable to meet Solas’ eyes.

“Why?” Morrigan asked.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Ellana asked her, frowning. “Or could it be that *you* wanted to be the one to drink?”

“Of those present, I alone have the training to make use of the Well.”

Some part of him cackled.

You? Little girl, what do you know of training?

Lavellan brushed the curl of irritation and contempt aside. “Walk and talk,” he said. “Abelas, lead the way, please.”

The Sentinels relaxed their bows. Abelas gestured at them and they disappeared down another hidden corridor. A large set of doors opened on the other side of the chamber and Abelas walked towards it, Lavellan close behind. The others followed.

Morrigan caught up to him. “Inquisitor, I implore you to rethink this. You do not understand the weight of this Well.”

“And *you* would?” Ellana snapped. “My brother knows what he’s doing.”

“Brother,” Abelas murmured in surprise beside Lavellan but nobody else heard. They passed another, smaller chamber. The mosaic on the wall depicted Ghilan’nain.

“I am certain he knows, but I am asking if he *understands*.”

“We’ve spent our whole lives studying our history and magic, witch,” she hissed. “What makes you think you are the authority on this?”

“I have studied lore no Dalish would have ever seen in their lifetime, girl.”

“Perhaps you are the one who doesn’t understand. You study us as if we are a curiosity, but we study because it is our identity. No matter how much you study, no matter how much you read, you will *never* feel its importance or its weight. You study our history for your ends, we study our history because it is our duty. Read all the magic you want. You will never *feel* it.”

A tense silence settled over the group. What the hell happened to these two while he was gone?

Abelas stopped walking and glanced back at them, a touch irate.

“That I am allowing you to enter the sanctum at all is already generous,” said Abelas. “The condition has been set.”

“During a talk that we were not privy to,” said Morrigan.

Abelas started walking again. “He is your leader, is he not?”

“It’s alright, Morrigan,” said Lavellan. “I know the cost.”

They entered another chamber, this time a shrine to Mythal. Lavellan stared up at her winged statue.

He knew the cost.

It was silent from then on. Lavellan could feel Solas staring at him.

They passed through the upper floor of a room where the Sentinels were battling the Venatori below. Lavellan was already moving towards them, unsheathing his daggers to help—

Solas blocked him with his arm.

“We must keep moving,” Solas murmured.

Lavellan nodded numbly, letting Solas turn him around. He threw another look over his shoulder as they walked away. One of the Sentinels fell, blood pooling on the tiles.

He ripped his gaze away. His own soldiers were dying too. He couldn’t afford any more delays.

Solas’ hand found his and squeezed. Lavellan held onto it for dear life.

Abelas stopped before a final door and glanced back at them.

“Prepare yourselves,” said Abelas. “The heart of the temple lies beyond these doors, and the vir’abelasan rests within it. I suspect the enemy has forced their way through.”

They readied their weapons.

Abelas opened the doors.

They stepped out onto a balcony overlooking a grand cavern rife with trees and greenery.

And across the balcony, a fair distance away, rested the Well of Sorrows, the cavern ceiling above it open to the skies. Sunlight rained over the Well.

“There,” breathed Morrigan. “The Well of Sorrows.”

“So Mythal endures,” said Solas.

“Andraste guide us,” murmured Cassandra.

Lavellan spotted Calpernia making her way towards it, the corpses of the Sentinels around her. He rushed down. Nobody stopped him this time.

Vergala flew off his shoulders and circled the skies.

“—that lyrium-addled fool will be delayed. We have time,” he heard her say. “But we mustn’t tarry.”

Calpernia nodded at the last of the Sentinels in the area.

“Kill them,” she said. “I want them dead before the Master arrives.”

One of the Venatori held a squirming Sentinel face down in the waters of the artificial channels. They snapped the Sentinel’s neck. The struggles stopped.

Abelas scowled. Lavellan itched for his daggers but stayed his hand as he walked towards her.

Calpernia stared up at the Well, reaching for it. “So close. The Well knows its vessel... and those who would despoil it.” She sighed and faced them. They stopped walking. “Stand aside, Inquisitor. The trials you set me, I have overcome. As a courtesy — leave now, or not at all.”

Abelas shot him a subtle look in question. Lavellan made an aborted motion with his hand that only Abelas could see. Abelas stayed put.

“No, Calpernia,” said Lavellan. “There’s something we have to discuss.”

She paused, scrutinising him. “True. I did not think you so civilised.”

Oh fuck off.

“The Well of Sorrows overflows with knowledge,” she said. “Power abandoned by those the elves worshipped as gods.” Calpernia glanced at it, then looked back at him. “To walk the Fade without the Anchor — *that* is what the Well will give Corypheus.”

“I don’t think you understand what kind of power you’re toying with,” said Lavellan.

She scoffed. “And you would? I knew you would take the Well for yourself, to ransack its wisdom to try to defeat Corypheus. But you’d still be just a child, playing with a sword.” She raised her arms, expression set in exaltation. “Corypheus will wield it as a master.”

Lavellan burst out laughing. Calpernia scowled, the Venatori looking at each other in confusion.

He’d held the Well for *six* years. He’d held secrets that would break the minds of most people for even longer. He was older than *everyone* in this room! He was not the child here. *She* was the child, dressed in paper armour, wielding wooden swords, her experience, knowledge, and preparation not even holding a flicker of a candle to his.

Corypheus was an *infant*.

His scornful laughter echoed. The laughter of an ancient, weary being.

Calpernia glowered. “Is something humorous, Inquisitor?”

He curbed his laughter, shoulders still shaking. He passed his hand down his face. “Something,” he said. “Dear Calpernia, your Master plans to use a ritual on you once you drink from the Well. Nothing but a puppet. No mind, no will. His own, personal container of knowledge. The *Vessel*.”

“That—” She pointed an accusing finger at him. “Where I come from, idle tales must be proven.”

Lavellan glanced at Solas, who took out the scroll of binding from his pack and handed it to Lavellan.

“Do you remember Erasthenes?” asked Lavellan. “Your old master, wasn’t he?”

“How do you—?”

He threw the scroll at her, the metal of its knobs clattering as it hit the ground. She picked it up and unrolled it.

“That’s a page from the binding ritual,” he said. “He’d tested it on Erasthenes first. It’s very effective, saw it firsthand.”

Calpernia glared up at him. “How could you know?”

“I visited the Temple of Dumat. Do you know why he didn’t want you there? Because Erasthenes was there. He didn’t want you to see.”

She looked down at the scroll again, gripping it. “No one has written these runes since...” She fell quiet.

And slowly, her expression shifted to rage.

“He made so many promises,” she spat, pacing, arms gesticulating. “And every one, a lie!” She cursed in Tevene. “He was to give Tevinter a true leader! If Corypheus would misuse me, he’d misuse them too. I was blind! I worked tirelessly until I felt my bones grinding against my skin, until I felt lightning in my blood. Worked to become *worthy*. And it was all for a lie.”

What had Lavellan done with her last time? He’d let her go...

But then Corypheus had struck her down.

And where was Samson? She’d held him back. They had a rivalry, didn’t they?

Lavellan opened his mouth—

An arrow whistled towards him.

Abelas pulled Lavellan back and raised his arm, a barrier shimmering over them. The arrow deflected off it.

Everyone jerked to action and unsheathed their weapons, turning towards the source of the arrow.

A mocking applause echoed. Red Templars came out of the tunnel that Calpernia had come from, and there Samson was, clapping.

“Pretty good performance there, Calpernia,” said Samson, grinning. “Very dramatic.”

She sneered. “Back so soon?”

“Clever trick back there, but we’re a persevering little band. Wear down at the clever ones long enough and they’ll eventually cave in.” He looked at Lavellan and his group. “The entire party is here, is it?”

Calpernia gave the scroll to one of the Venatori and took out her staff.

Samson’s grin faded, expression turning grim. “I know we’ve had our differences, Calpernia, but I’ve always respected how hard you worked.”

“A shame that I can’t say the same to you.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” said Samson, “but it almost looks like you’re betraying us. Is this what’s happening?” He took a step forward, the red lyrium in his armour glowing.

Lavellan inched his group away, glancing between the two of them, sensing the growing tension.

“Inquisitor,” said Calpernia, “if any power can challenge Corypheus, it lies in the Well. Perhaps the price is too high. But if you can take it... humble him.”

Samson unsheathed his sword and sighed. “This is such a waste.”

“I will hold this imbecile back,” she said. “Hurry.”

Samson snarled. “The Inquisitor isn’t going anywhere.” He charged with the Templars.

Calpernia raised a wall of flames.

“Go!” she barked.

“Wait,” said Lavellan and urgently gestured at Ellana. She placed the artifact that would destroy Samson’s armour in his hand. He raised it. The inscriptions on the disk glowed red.

Samson’s armour flashed.

“What—” said Samson. The armour flared and he cried out, falling to his knees.

“I’ve broken his armour,” said Lavellan. “Do with him what you will.”

“Vitae benefaria, Inquisitor,” said Calpernia, and rushed towards the Red Templars along with her Venatori.

“Go!” cried Lavellan and they raced towards the Well. Abelas raised the stairs and they hurriedly ascended, the sounds of fighting behind them.

“Templars and mages fighting,” muttered Varric beside him as they ran. “I’m all for circular narratives, but this is just getting ridiculous.”

They slowed as they reached the top.

And there, before them, were the remnants of the Well of Sorrows. Across them was the last eluvian in Mythal’s temple.

The Well of Sorrows in his head surged and blared, and the Well of Sorrows in front of him reached back.

He stepped forward.

Solas grabbed his arm and stopped him. Lavellan looked back and met Solas’ imploring look.

“Please, vhenan,” he said. “I beg you, do not drink. We have time to reconsider.”

“I have to,” Lavellan whispered, resting his hand over Solas’. “That was the condition.”

“But why?” he hissed, glancing up at Abelas. “Why? What did you discuss?”

“I, too, would like to know,” said Morrigan, crossing her arms. “What deal have you struck with the Inquisitor?”

Abelas frowned. “There was no deal. He is simply the worthiest to receive the Well’s knowledge.”

“And what deems one worthy?” she asked.

Lavellan shot another glance at Calpernia and Samson over his shoulders. Samson was pushing Calpernia back. Urgency prickled at the back of his neck.

“We don’t have time to argue,” he said.

“You lead the one organisation capable of opposing Corypheus,” said Morrigan. “If drinking from the Well without further thought were to compromise you—”

“Suddenly worried about my welfare, are we?” he couldn’t help but snark.

“Alright,” said Varric, raising a placating hand. “Deep breaths, everyone.”

“He drinks,” said Abelas, looking at Morrigan, “or I destroy the Well. Better it be lost than bestowed upon the undeserving.”

Solas’ grip tightened around Lavellan’s arm.

“Don’t,” Solas whispered, voice breaking. He closed his eyes and recomposed himself. “Let her drink. Better she reaps the price of her ambition over you paying for it out of obligation. Please. I have no wish to see you— You have suffered enough.”

“I am with Solas, Inquisitor,” said Cassandra, casting him a worried look. “Whatever the price of this Well may be, let her pay for it. She is willing.”

“Abelas will destroy the Well,” Lavellan said. “Is that something you all would like to risk?”

“Not if I do not let him touch it,” said Morrigan, her magic swirling in her hand as she gave Abelas a dark look. Abelas shifted into a defensive position.

“Don’t touch him!” Lavellan snapped, his sudden vehemence surprising everyone. He fixed Morrigan with a murderous look. “If you raise your hand against him, Morrigan, I *promise* you will rue it.”

She lowered her hand, the echoes of a sneer on her face. “I did not know you had grown so attached.”

“He is the last of the People. I have seen enough of them die today.”

A large explosion shook the air. They looked back at the battle.

Calpernia and Samson had both been knocked down, both trying to stagger back up. A Red Templar Behemoth crushed a Venatori’s head.

His head throbbed in time with his heartbeats. The Well was pulling at him. Pulling towards, pulling apart.

Lavellan cupped Solas’ face. “Vhenan,” he murmured, “let go. I know what this entails. But I need to drink from the Well. It’s the only way.”

“You have been telling me that there are alternative paths. Perhaps there is an alternative path, this time. We can defeat Corypheus another way.”

He gave Solas a sad smile. “My love, this *is* the alternative path for me.” Lavellan looked at him, trying to convey the deeper meaning behind his words.

This isn’t just about Corypheus.

Solas’ face fell.

He hung his head, and slowly, eased his grip on Lavellan’s arm.

“Thank you,” said Lavellan.

Solas stepped back and looked at him with a sorrow reflective of the Well’s namesake. Lavellan took a shaky breath and faced the Well.

“What is the cost of this Well?” Morrigan asked.

“Those who partake in the vir’abelasan,” said Abelas, “shall be forever bound to the will of Mythal.”

Morrigan shot him a sceptical look. “Bound? To a goddess who no longer exists, if she ever did?”

“Bound, as we are bound.” He faced Lavellan and nodded.

“Will you guide me through it?” Lavellan asked.

Abelas gestured for everyone to step back and walked with Lavellan to the edge of the Well. Lavellan watched its surface ripple, looking like liquid metal.

“The magic will reach for you,” Abelas said softly, so as not to be overheard. “Allow it. Let it seep within your bones, and twine within your soul, and the Well will reconcile. Your knowledge will flow into you. You are both conduit and vessel.”

“Did Asunara say anything about this?”

Another explosion behind them. Lavellan ignored it.

“She has deemed you prepared.”

He smiled wryly. “She doesn’t believe that.”

Abelas paused, then said, “No. But is one ever truly prepared?”

“No.” Lavellan took another breath, deep and steadying, and exhaled through his mouth. “Should I take my shoes off? This feels mildly awkward.”

“I... am unsure.”

Lavellan snorted, some of his tension easing. “Wasn’t quite covered in Sentinel training? Should partakers of the Well shed their articles of clothing?”

“[Mirthadra^{\[2\]}](#), please.”

“Okay, okay. I’m delaying, can you tell?”

“Yes.”

At least Lavellan was smiling.

He stepped in, descending the short stairs, until the water was lapping around his waist. Slivers of blue glowed within the waters, rippling around him. The pulling in his head and around him grew stronger, until he felt as if his centre of gravity had simultaneously dropped to his feet and risen to his head.

Lavellan had stopped at this depth last time to drink.

But the Well beckoned him deeper.

He answered its call, stepping deeper and deeper, the water climbing from his waist to his chest. The water pressed against his ribs, warm.

His reflection wavered in the water. Beyond it, darkness.

Deeper.

His head felt clogged. Something reached for him, seeking, grasping.

Lavellan closed his eyes, took a deep breath...

And submerged himself.

Water pressed around him, muffling the noises. The ground beneath his feet disappeared and Lavellan floated, but he didn't panic. There was only... serenity.

He opened his eyes.

Eternal darkness. Warmth.

His head was quiet. No whispers. Total silence after six years of background noise.

"Isha'belsal'in," came a cold whisper.

"Ras'virelan."

"Warleader."

"Herald."

"Inquisitor."

"Mahanon."

"Lavellan."

He felt the bottom of the Well beneath him, and the water set him down gently. Lavellan rose, and the water turned into a dark and endless mist. He could breathe again.

A hundred pairs of glowing eyes opened and peered at him from within the misty darkness.

"Who are you?" they asked.

"You know who I am," he said. His mouth never opened, but his voice still rang clearer than the purest of waters and louder than the crack of a bell.

More pairs of eyes opened and stared.

"We have dwelled within you. And now you shall dwell within us. Will you know yourself better, then?"

"Maybe."

"Will you listen, then?"

He paused, tilted his head. *"I have been listening."*

"We have mocked, we have encouraged, we have taunted, we have praised, we have guided. We have offered individual voices, and a chorus. Symphony and cacophony," said the Well. *"We have tried everything, but you have never truly listened. You have never understood. We were asking to*

be heard, yet you have ignored us.”

Lavellan’s eyes widened.

“Yet we have chosen to stay.”

“Why?”

Ghostly hands reached for him.

“Because you have taught us hope.”

The hands touched his shoulder and he gasped, feeling their grasp within him, around his very soul. He staggered back. A chill shot through his veins.

“Because you have taught us pain.”

The chill ruptured and became a burn. Lavellan cried and doubled over.

“Because your mind is a battlefield and a meadow. Broken pieces and intricate assemblages. Shadows and light.”

A sensation pulsed within him. It wasn’t pain. It was... something else. Something searing, something soothing, claws shredding, gentle hands mending. The agony of an arrow piercing flesh, the comforting warmth of a broth as it slides down your chest and pools in your stomach. Dust from abandoned yet beloved places, gilding from occupied yet shunned spaces.

“If you join, will you finally see?”

The ghostly hands covered his eyes.

“Will you finally hear?”

The hands covered his ears.

“Will you finally feel?”

The hands gripped his ribs. Fingers hooked between his tendons and ligaments and pulled them off the bone.

*“Will you finally **listen**?”*

They pried him open, peeling his defences back layer by layer. Everything laid bare.

“Let us know you.”

Thick, electric magic flooded his lungs.

Lavellan opened his mouth and screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Strap in yall. Whatever for? You'll see ;)

And a Faronel *is* a name! Well done to the people who got the falon part right :D
Although the other guesses were also very interesting. I loved the code word idea.

Updates may get spotty because uni's started for me again. I'll still do my best to stay on schedule but if one day (or god forbid, one week) an update doesn't show up, assume I'm battling scientific papers and the dreaded group work.

Anyway, Abelas' unknown past (besides that one codex entry) made me go "ah perfect" and I yinked him into my canon. Think of the DA lore as Cinderella and I'm the evil stepsisters ripping bits and pieces off her dress.

(My friend offered a better imagery: I am the mice and birds taking bits and pieces from the stepsisters' belongings to make a gorgeous dress. That's very nice of you, but I am Gremlin. If you haven't watched Cinderella, then pretend I said something else that was relevant)

Translation

[1] **Falon, rosasha, panelan:** Lifelong friend, enduring, warrior^[1]

[2] **Mirthadra:** Honoured (a term of respect)^[1]

A land of possibilities

Chapter Notes

FLASHBACK ARC BABES LET'S GOOOOOOOOO.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *The realm of the Beyond* | ??? years ago |

It was lonely here.

Boring.

Change manipulated its surroundings, turned it into a sprawling meadow dotted with colourful plants. It had seen this scene before, in a book that one of the spirits of Knowledge had had. The elves called the colourful plants ‘flowers’. Their bright colour’s primary function was to attract pollinators so it could reproduce. More flowers. Live to keep going and going and going.

It stared out at the expanse of the field.

Boring.

Change transformed the field into a rainy city street that it had also seen in books, the raindrops suspended mid-air.

What was the point of rain? Why would water fall from the skies? It was apparently another part of the cycle of life, but what did it mean, to live? What was the point?

Change shifted the rainy city back into the everchanging paths of the Beyond and roamed, continuously changing its environment as it passed in its bid to find something stimulating. It eventually stumbled upon the realm of a spirit of Stability, finding itself in a small sitting room. Stability was in an armchair in front of a fireplace.

This was quite dull.

Change turned the scene into a swirl of colours.

Stability stared at the space where its seat once rested, then looked at Change, mildly disgruntled.

“I kindly ask that you restore my realm,” said Stability.

Change turned Stability’s realm back into the sitting room.

“Are you not dissatisfied with this?” asked Change.

“No, for this is what gives me purpose. I find it engaging.”

“You are a bore.”

“Perhaps, but I am content.” Stability settled into its chair. “Are you?”

Change left its realm.

Spirits had no concept of time, felt no need to quantify or track it, but Change could still feel the drag of its claws.

Change eventually started bothering multiple spirits. Justice didn’t spare Change any attention. Glory welcomed Change, but Change found Glory too obnoxious, so it left. Love merely looked at Change, then made a soft noise and winked out of view. Knowledge also welcomed Change, and it enjoyed Knowledge’s company and library, but Change never stayed for long.

Other Change spirits either shared their findings or stayed away since they were attempting to preserve their equilibrium.

Soon, Change started bothering demons.

Pride scoffed, Nostalgia shrieked and ran, Violence... well, the outcome could be inferred from the name.

Change had found those interactions the most fun and amusing, but in the end, it was all the same. Predictable.

“Have you tried visiting the waking world?” asked Knowledge after Change visited its realm. This Knowledge had an upside-down library. How ingenious. “The elves have made a civilisation.”

“What is a civilisation?”

Knowledge showed it a few scrolls. Change read through them and grew invigorated at what it had learned.

It made up its mind to visit the waking world and see for itself, but the moment it left the Beyond, the rigidity of the waking world constrained Change, made it difficult to *exist*—

Change threw itself back into the Beyond, shrinking into itself.

“Never again,” it swore.

Wisdom spirits were rare.

Change immediately tailed the one it found.

Wisdom was patient with it, let it follow as they meandered through the Beyond. Wisdom would recreate events and Change would watch, transfixed, finally able to gaze upon the waking world without setting foot within it. Change watched everything, from battles to simple conversations by the coast.

“Where do you find these?” Change asked.

“I travel the waking world, and return with my findings,” said Wisdom.

“The waking world hurts me.”

“It is a place of possibility. Possibilities always hurt.”

“Can I follow you some more? I am so terribly bored.”

Wisdom looked at Change. “Boredom signals unfulfillment. Lack of meaning.”

“I am Change. I am surrounded by change.”

“But is it the right kind?”

“Is there another kind?”

“In the land of possibilities.” Wisdom watched the scene playing out before them. It was a sunlit garden, two girls conversing on the grass. One of the girls placed a crown of woven flowers upon the other’s head.

“Why did she do that?” asked Change. “Flowers aren’t meant for that.”

“Why not?”

“They are merely attractors for pollinators.”

“The colour was pleasing, the girl wove the pleasing colours, and enjoyed the company of her friend and valued said company. Thus, the flowers she adored have been placed upon the one she adored. Things are more than their function. Once given meaning, they transform.” Wisdom looked at Change again. “You are bored because you are seeking a catalyst. Perhaps Purpose can show you the way.”

Change left Wisdom, contemplating its words, thinking of the flowers. Of their meaning.

If flowers could become a message of adoration, could Change become a message of... what? What could it be besides Change? Entropy? Envy? What else beyond those?

Staying as Change was, ironically, not changing.

Purpose. What purpose could there be?

It wandered the Beyond once more, but the scenes it would create now included people. They weren’t as good as Wisdom’s given Change’s lack of experience, but they still felt... more.

Was that it, then? People? People gave things meaning?

A bright green light caught Change’s attention. It glanced at the source and squinted at the spirit making its way through the Beyond. A spirit of Purpose. And beside it...

Change tilted its head.

Beside it was the soul of a deer.

Purpose pranced with the deer, chiming with laughter as they played. Why was it playing with the deer?

Perhaps Purpose can show you the way.

Purpose continued through the Beyond with the deer, and Change's confusion grew.

The souls of the dead would often pass, but most spirits never paid them any attention since their energies would eventually join the Beyond's. They were fleeting. So what was Purpose doing?

Should Change follow them?

In the time it took for Change to make up its mind, a newcomer had arrived. Neither spirit nor demon nor soul.

An elf. A physical elf.

"Purpose?" called the elf. "Purpose, where have you gone?" He looked around him, distraught. His presence in the Beyond was strange. The area around him seemed... strained, as if fighting to keep itself from dispersing. There was a terrible pull around him, something tangible, a slick, sticking pull. Was it because he was here physically? No, Change had seen a few elves come here physically and none of them had such a presence.

This was different.

This was new!

Change followed the elf as he searched. Should it tell him where Purpose had gone? Yes, it ought to. It could speak to this strange man in the process.

But two demons had beaten Change to it.

Fear and Deceit blocked the elf's path, having taken on the form of two ravens.

"You are lost, and soon you will fade," said Fear.

"Your brother has abandoned you," said Deceit. "He no longer loves you."

Brother?

Change had expected the elf to capitulate, retreat, perhaps lash out in anger.

But he calmly stared them in the eye and said, "No. He has not."

Fear cackled. Deceit perched on his shoulders and cooed in his ear.

"You will fade, and nobody will remember you. Your love is not returned."

"That is not true," he said firmly, convinced of its truth.

Fear perched on his other shoulder. "You will never find him, and he will be lost to you forever."

Fear and Deceit. They were annoying. Change enjoyed disturbing their realms whenever it could get the chance.

"I will find him," said the elf with a smile in his voice, and continued walking. "And I am on the correct path."

"You are not," hissed Deceit. "This path leads to ruin."

He was, in fact, on the right path. And he seemed to know this, too.

"I see," he told Deceit.

Fear had fallen silent. Change smiled to itself. Fear could not speak if it could not sense fear, and this elf had eased his, walking with a silent surety.

"Yes, you are correct," crooned Deceit. "Yes, surely this path leads to your destination."

The elf changed course.

"No! You have doomed yourself."

"A shame," said the elf.

Change, gripped by a surge of elation, trailed after the three, making sure it wouldn't be noticed.

Deceit, who could not utter a word of truth, had inadvertently led the elf to his goal. There the spirit of Purpose was, still playing with the deer.

The elf released Fear and Deceit, both retreating in shame at having been bested.

"Purpose," called the elf.

Purpose looked back at him. "Dirthamen! Hello!"

"Why have you gone so far? You know I cannot walk the Beyond as freely as you. Why have you separated from me?"

"Ah, you see..." Purpose patted the deer's head. "This one suddenly regained its energy the deeper into the Beyond we traversed. Burdened no longer by its physical form. Brother, I think... I think this is what I am meant to do. To guide the souls of the dying." It embraced Dirthamen. "I am sorry, we can no longer be as we were. But I will still remain with you."

Dirthamen stayed still for a moment, then he eventually returned the embrace.

"I wish to see you happy," said Dirthamen. "Come, let us go home, then."

Purpose patted the deer's snout and watched as the deer trotted off. Then, hand in hand, Dirthamen and Purpose made their way back.

Change watched them leave.

"Dirthamen?" asked Purpose.

"Yes?"

"I would like a body."

"We can arrange for one when we get back."

"I've already chosen a name."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Henceforth, call me Falon'Din."

Change detested the waking world with every fibre of its being, but it endured and steadily acclimatised to the nature of it. It was the only way he could follow Dirthamen. Dirthamen, who would visit his beloved city in the mountains and solve disputes with well-crafted words. He could turn failures into victories.

He could turn change into art.

The war with the Earth and its children only cemented Change's decision further. It was Dirthamen's strategies which had won the elves most of their decisive battles.

And the night after the elves' victory, beneath the stars, they finally spoke for the first time.

Change returned to the Beyond after their conversation, its mind made. It visited Wisdom to tell it the news.

"You have found it," said Wisdom before Change could even say anything. "Your purpose."

"How did you know?"

"You are brighter."

"I am going to gain a body. I have decided."

Wisdom paused. "Are you certain?"

"They have hailed him as a leader and they will make him a king, soon. But a mountain peak invites a storm. He will need someone to be his shield, his hidden blade, his eyes and ears. I can do it. I will do it."

"Will you be fine?"

"Change is present in another form within that realm. It makes sense. Change itself would change in a different circumstance. And now I must change in my different circumstance."

"So you are here for a farewell."

"Yes."

"It will hurt."

Change sparked with joy.

"Possibilities always hurt," he repeated, a phrase from so long ago.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 0 years after the *Founding of Arlathan (FA)* |

Change stared at its new body. *His* new body. Fingers, hands, arms. He touched his face. His *face*.

His face pulled, muscles settling to match the joyous sensation in his heart.

A smile.

| *An unnamed island, Elvhenan* | 72 FA |

Thalamya, who had been his mentor for so long, passed him his daggers. It was a silent farewell.

“Go forth and serve Our Most Venerable,” she said. “Do not fail him.”

He bowed his head. “I will do my best, and more. Thank you for your lessons, and your patience.”

She straightened his uniform, expression stern as ever, but her eyes held a slight shimmer.

Change smiled. “Hahren, are those tears in your eyes?”

“Perhaps I am teary because you have finally found manners. Do *not* mouth off to Lord Dirthamen. It is already a great honour for him to have personally chosen you.”

“I know,” he murmured.

She shot him an irritated look.

“I know because I know,” he griped.

She pinched his ear.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 73 FA |

He smiled at the name he’d written down.

Lavellan.

It had been months.

Lavellan sighed and pushed the book in front of him away, laying his head down on the table and staring at the stack of books surrounding him.

It had been months since Dirthamen had announced that he’d teach Lavellan how to control his power, but that was all they’d done. Study, practice, more studying. Lavellan enjoyed it, but it was beginning to feel dull. He wanted to go on missions, to put his training to use, to actually be *useful* to Dirthamen and the empire.

Instead, he was holed away in the Vir Dirthara, poring over page after page, scroll after scroll,

meditating.

The only thing that made the endless hours of studying bearable was when Dirthamen would come and guide him through lessons, but Dirthamen hadn't come in weeks. Lavellan would often see Dirthamen's agents pass, and he'd feel like a flightless bird watching the others of its kind soaring in the skies.

Lavellan chewed on his lower lip and lifted his head, scowling at the books in front of him.

No, he refused to be left behind.

He stood, looking around the large room he was in. The shelves stretched all the way up to the high ceiling, filled to bursting with books and scrolls. Lavellan closed the book he'd been reading and threw it over his shoulder. The book flapped its way back to its shelf. He left through the eluvian in the corner and made his way over to a specific area of the Vir Dirthara.

One of the Archivists looked at him in question once he arrived.

"Mirthadra," greeted the spirit. "This area hosts advanced knowledge for the arcane arts. May I help you?"

"I need a compendium."

The Archivist scanned him, assessing his skill and power. He held his breath. Would it deem him powerful enough to be here?

It nodded. "This way, Mirthadra."

Lavellan followed, grinning.

The weeks passed. Lavellan spent most of it poring over the compendiums, searching through the variety of advanced spells and testing them out. He manipulated the waves of sound so he could hear distant noises, read about paralysing the muscles (though he'd been unable to test that out since he'd rather not do it on himself), furthered his shapeshifting abilities, and so much more.

Dirthamen still hadn't come to visit him, but at least Lavellan's enthusiasm had been renewed.

He was in the middle of casting an illusion, having turned the room into the night sky so it would look as though he were floating over the clouds, when the eluvian in the corner shimmered.

Lavellan froze.

Dirthamen stepped out, then stopped.

The eluvian's blue glow was stark in the darkness.

"Uh," said Lavellan and hurriedly dispelled the illusion. He stood to attention and bowed. "Ma Venuralas, welcome back."

Dirthamen stayed quiet, examining the room with an impassive expression, his aura hidden as usual.

The room was a mess. Books were scattered on the floor from when Lavellan had attempted to manipulate the wind, and the stacks of advanced compendiums on the table were damning evidence.

Dirthamen still said nothing.

Lavellan bit his inner cheek. Shit, he was in trouble.

“Do it again,” said Dirthamen.

Lavellan blinked.

“The illusion,” he clarified. “Do it again.”

“I— Yes, of course.” Lavellan gathered his magic, raising his hands swirling with golden light. He felt for the energy of the Fade, grasping at specific points and placing them into formation.

Lavellan brought his hands down and *pulled* at the Fade.

The darkness fell like a curtain, immediately followed by the winking stars and sweep of nebulae.

Dirthamen waved his hand and auroras glimmered around them. Lavellan let out a small, awed breath as shapes formed within the auroras. There was a forest and a flock of birds, a herd of dancing deer, and a soaring dragon letting out a flaming roar. Lavellan focused and added his own shapes. He formed a ship rocking over tumultuous waves, a rabbit hopping in a glade, a school of fish weaving between corals.

They watched the light show in silence. Lavellan snuck a glance at Dirthamen and found him smiling.

The illusion soon faded and Lavellan faced Dirthamen, sheepish.

“I apologise,” said Lavellan. “I should have stuck to my studies.”

Dirthamen approached the table and scanned the books on it. “These are advanced compendiums. You no longer seem to be struggling with control.”

“I...” Lavellan paused at the realisation. “No,” he said, a touch surprised. “Ma Venuralas, were you testing me? Is that why you haven’t returned? To drive me to boredom?”

Dirthamen laughed softly and faced him. “I do not have that much foresight, Lavellan. I hadn’t meant to leave you for so long. A few issues simply required my attention, and they weren’t being resolved as quick as I would have preferred.” He perused through one of the open compendiums. “I think our lessons will have to end.”

He frowned. “How come?”

“You no longer need them.” He closed the compendium and reached into his robes. “You are getting restless, I can tell. You wish to spread your wings?” He took out a small cylinder and walked over to Lavellan, handing it to him.

Lavellan accepted it tentatively. Dirthamen’s crest was on the cylinder’s cap.

“Is this...?” Lavellan opened it and took the scroll inside, unrolling it.

“Your first mission,” said Dirthamen.

Lavellan returned to Dirthamen two weeks later.

He walked through Dirthamen's throne room, dragging the shackled traitor behind him. The other priests and agents present watched Lavellan pass while Dirthamen sat waiting on his throne. He stopped at the base of the steps to Dirthamen's throne and threw the traitor forward. The traitor whimpered, his aura practically marinating him in his own guilt and fear. Lavellan knelt and bowed his head.

"I have found the man who has been selling our court's secrets, ma Venuralas," he said. "I also have records of his admission and have successfully identified those he has transacted with."

Murmurs swept across the crowd.

"This case has eluded our best for months," whispered one of the agents within the crowd. "How did he do it so fast?"

"Well done," said Dirthamen, and Lavellan smiled behind his mask at the hints of surprise in his tone.

Any missions sent Lavellan's way were completed in the same manner: quickly and thoroughly.

At last, he was able to put himself to use. Not only that, but the world held so much... possibility. *People* held so much possibility. He may not be able to change a mountain into a river and he could not bend the fabric of reality to his whim, but there was still change. Change from people, within people. They made decisions, they dealt with consequences, they reacted, they learned, they grew.

They *changed*.

And that made everything so much more interesting. It wasn't predictable because people weren't predictable.

He journeyed into the Beyond once more, seeking out his friend. Wisdom was watching a dance around a bonfire this time. Lavellan sat with it.

"You seem happy," said Wisdom.

"I am! You were right, it *was* a land of possibilities. I am glad I endured the pain."

Wisdom didn't respond. Lavellan frowned.

"Is everything alright?" he asked.

"I... yes. Simply concerned about a friend of mine." It shook its head. "Ah, but tell me of your endeavours."

He grinned.

Without a name or a face to attribute to the mysterious, masked agent excelling at his missions, Dirthamen's court had started calling him Ras'virelan. The Shadow Walker. One who walked in obscurity. It would be whispered in fear, envy, admiration, curiosity, and everything in between

And Lavellan only grew in power.

He devised a way to open eluvians without a keystone or a pass.

He found a way to change his face.

The whispers of a new name eventually surfaced in Elvhenan's streets. Isha'belsal'in, they said. The Man of Many Faces.

Soon, Ras'virelan founded the El'ras'amelan. The Keepers of Secrets and Shadows.

And so, the years passed. As the raven grew in the shadows, elsewhere, the wolf accepted the sword and was deprived of his nature.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 198 FA |

"I have a task for you," said Dirthamen. "The Arlathanian Guard is unable to handle the matter any longer and should have received orders to stand down. I want you to take over the investigation."

"What is it?" asked Lavellan.

"There is a demon hiding in the town of Ga'amanir and the Guard has had no luck with identifying or locating it. I want you to find and kill this demon."

"Vin, ma Venuralas."

| *Ga'amanir, Elvhenan* | 198 FA |

Lavellan arrived at an abandoned house in the outskirts of Ga'amanir. This was where the demon had recently killed.

He knelt and frowned at the substance smeared on the ground. Demon blood. The magic signature in the air was too muddled and old to be of any use.

Someone approached behind him.

He had his daggers out and pressed against the intruder's throat in a flash.

It was an Arlathanian Guard. He had his hand on his sword and had been ready to draw it, but he hadn't been fast enough.

"What are you doing here, soldier?" Lavellan asked.

The guard scowled, Mythal's vallaslin shifting on his face. "I'm here to investigate the recent murders due to demonic activity. Who are *you*, creeping around in the..." He trailed off, appraising Lavellan properly. "Wait, that uniform and mask... You're from the El'ras'amelan."

Lavellan took the dagger off his throat and sheathed it. "Lord Dirthamen has sent me here to investigate. You should have received orders to stand down."

"There may have been complications with the correspondence. I will take you to my superior. You can discuss the issue with him."

"That will do. What is your name, soldier?"

"Shielan."

Shielan took Lavellan to Ga'amanir's barracks and entered the general's office.

"[Rajelan^{\[1\]}](#)," greeted Shielan, saluting. The general, who had been leaning over the table and examining the papers upon it, looked up at their arrival. "It seems there's been a conflict of interest."

The general straightened and frowned at Shielan, then directed that frown to Lavellan, eyes like crystal, back as upright and brittle as a rigid arrow. He was garbed in the Arlathanian Guard's golden armour, a wolf pelt on his shoulders. The emerald branches of Mythal's vallaslin stretched over his forehead.

Lavellan tilted his head. Was this not the Wisdom spirit who had taken on a body for Mythal? What was his name again?

"El'ras'amelan," he said, voice more lyrical than Lavellan had expected, like silk fluttering to the floor. It was a voice that he would have expected to belong to a scholar over a soldier. "It is rare for one of your order to come into the light. What conflict of interest might there have been?"

"You have been ordered to stand down. This case has now fallen into the jurisdiction of Dirthamen's court."

The general stared at him coolly.

"No," he said.

Lavellan stared. "No?" he echoed. Shielan inched back, glancing between them. "You are defying direct orders."

"What orders?" He smiled. It was sharp, a glimmer of defiance shimmering in his eyes. "I have not received any."

“There may have been an unforeseen complication.” Was this man being serious? “But the orders are there all the same.”

“Then until I receive those orders, and until I hold said orders in my hands, I will not withdraw.”

Amazing. He *was* being serious. What kind of irresponsible— Was the Guard short-staffed? Surely, they wouldn't have chosen such a man to be a leader.

Nevertheless, Lavellan kept his calm, gave the general an impassive stare that was as sharp as the general's smile.

The silence stretched from tense into uncomfortable.

The general's smile eventually faded and his eyes narrowed.

“I see,” said Lavellan. “Well then, seeing as I have held *my* orders in my hands, I am just as authorised to investigate this matter. While we wait for your instructions, I suppose we will have to work together.”

“My soldiers and I are more than enough.”

“Then why have you not identified the demon yet?”

Another tense silence pulled tight between them.

Shielan cleared his throat. “I'm going to investigate the perimeter of the town.”

The general glanced at Shielan, then gave a curt nod. Shielan left.

“What is your name, Rajelan?” asked Lavellan.

“Solas.”

Lavellan frowned. “Do you think this is a jest? I require your name.”

“It is not a jest.”

He stared at *Solas* some more, but the general merely met his gaze with a steady stare.

“You're serious,” said Lavellan.

“It is rude to question one's chosen name.”

The flickers of irritation plucked at Lavellan's patience. “I humbly apologise, Rajelan Solas.”

“Such ease with which you lie,” he mused. “Perhaps the demon is already staring back at me?”

This motherfuc—

“Please display behaviour befitting of your position,” said Lavellan.

Solas fell quiet again, before he looked out the window, the rings in his hair clinking at the movement. He had one of those hair colours that Lavellan had trouble placing. Somewhere between blonde and red? “You are right, I apologise. I have been on edge due to the case and I thank you for your patience. May I ask for your name?”

“I cannot tell you. It is a matter of confidentiality.”

“What shall I refer to you as?”

“Ras will do.”

Solas paused, glanced back at him. “You are the Ras’ virelan?”

“Yes. I look forward to working with you, Solas.”

Lavellan turned and walked away.

“Why did you rush in?” Lavellan demanded, failing to curb his anger. “The demon would have revealed itself if you’d stayed your hand!”

Solas scowled. “If I had not acted, Shielan would have perished.”

“And now we’ve lost the demon’s trail! All our efforts now amount to nothing.”

“Nothing?” he asked, pitch rising, their auras clashing. “I saved one of my soldiers’ lives!”

“Your soldiers know the risks of their duty! Congratulations, Rajelan,” he spat. “Your soldier lives, and now an innocent townspeople will die tonight because we have not contained the demon fast enough. You are too short-sighted and impulsive.”

“For caring about my men?”

“For prioritising your personal desire and attachments over your responsibility and the People! Your soldier knew he was about to die, he *knew* it was for the sake of the People—”

“My soldier *is* a part of the People—”

“Do not interrupt me—”

“You are not letting me talk—”

“I’m okay, thank you for asking,” said Shielan dryly, bandaged in the stretcher as a healer worked on him.

“If it were one of yours in Shielan’s place,” said Solas, “you would not have hesitated to save them.”

“If it does not compromise our progress, then yes. Otherwise, my agents understand the risks.”

Solas gave him an appalled look. “You are a heartless man.”

Weeks of putting up with Solas had frayed Lavellan’s patience. Something in Lavellan finally snapped and he surged forward, gripping Solas’ collar and snarling in his face. Solas didn’t back down, staring back heatedly.

“Watch your tongue,” Lavellan growled.

“Ah, so you *are* capable of emotions.”

“Were you looking for anger? Because here it is.” He shoved Solas away and took a few calming breaths, rubbing his hand down his face.

“What’s done is done,” said Shielan, waving a lazy hand. “While I was ready for a very noble sacrifice earlier, I am also very, *very* glad to be alive. Terrible news, I understand, but we can’t all get what we want.”

“I think,” said Lavellan, clipped, “that this partnership is clearly not working. The Arlathanian Guard will have to rescind their authority on the case, as per original orders.”

Solas crossed his arms. “We are not going anywhere.”

“You have proven yourself impulsive, impatient, and unqualified to handle this case. Don’t let your stupid pride get in the way. You are unfit to be objective.”

“Objective? Or callous? It is not the end of the world. We have not sealed our doom by allowing the demon to escape.”

Lavellan’s chest tightened and fire licked at his blood.

“Fine,” he said icily. “Then any deaths because of the demon from here on out is on your hands.”

He stormed off.

He had to go back to the drawing board and devise a new strategy. He had to catch this demon before it could kill any more.

Chapter End Notes

There they aaaare. Still young, relatively.

We'll be delving into Elvhenan times in more depth than the snapshots of memories, but still not as in-depth as it would be if it were a separate story.

“For prioritising your personal desire and attachments over your responsibility and the People!” -things that did not age well

ALSO, DARKANI FINISHED THE [CHANGE TAROT CARD](#) AHHHH!

Translation

[1] **Rajelan:** Leader. Commander. A general term of address for someone in a position of leadership. [\[1\]](#)

Mourning rose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

| Ga'amanir, Elvhenan | 198 FA |

The Arlathanian Guard received new orders to retreat, and since the order came from Dirthamen himself, they had no choice but to follow.

Lavellan sighed in relief as he watched them leave. The raven that had carried the message perched on his shoulder and he scratched the underside of its beak.

"You seem incensed," said the raven. Dirthamen, rather. His voice echoed in Lavellan's head.

"Rajelan Solas is not my favourite person in the world, no." He looked at the raven. "Have you shapeshifted or is this momentary control?"

"Momentary control. I am currently at a dull banquet and pretending to meditate."

Lavellan chuckled and walked back to the town. "They call him the Wolf. Aren't wolves supposed to be great team workers? He is very poor at that. They should reconsider the name."

"It may be more fitting than you realise. A wolf is loyal to its pack."

"Who'd want to be part of his smelly pack?" Lavellan muttered to himself but Dirthamen overheard and laughed.

"Solas is not so bad."

"He's temperamental. He just made more work for me."

"Will you be alright handling this alone? You may send for some of the El'amelan."

"No, they have their own missions and training to worry about. I can manage. I will call for backup if I need it."

"Very well." Dirthamen severed his connection and his voice faded. The raven flew off his shoulder and returned to Dirthamen.

Lavellan set to work.

It was an Envy demon, masquerading as a child. Unmasked at long last, it screeched at Lavellan, all twisted limbs and patchworked skin.

"Go!" he yelled at the inhabitants of the house. They screamed and left.

“Unfair, unfair!” screeched Envy. “I want— You understand, right? I want!”

He scowled. This demon had given him too much work over the past few weeks. At least Envy demons were easier to deal with once they were unmasked, so defeating it proved simple enough.

Before delivering the killing blow, Lavellan grabbed its face.

“Where is the child you were impersonating?” he asked.

Envy cackled. “You will never find her.”

Lavellan pressed his free hand to a shallow cut in his leg and smeared the blood over his palms.

“Really?” he asked, and magic built up around his hand, gathering energy from his blood. A metallic scent filled the air. He gripped Envy’s head and he forced his way into its memories.

Envy shrieked and convulsed.

Lavellan scanned through its memories, then found his target.

Envy had trapped the child underneath the house, and it had also damaged her vocal cords so that she couldn’t call for help.

He set Envy alight from within and released his grip on its face, let it writhe and screech on the floor. He didn’t bother waiting for Envy’s return to the Beyond, instead rushing down into the house’s basement, breaking the floorboards at the correct spot. There was a pit underneath and the little girl was there, huddled at the bottom.

She looked up, flinching from the light. Her blonde hair was dirtied and matted, hands covered in scrapes, her bones prominent beneath her skin. She must have been depending on the Fade for sustenance, if only to keep herself alive. Shit, she’d been here for weeks. Had he taken any longer to reach her...

Lavellan descended and took his mask off so that he wouldn’t appear intimidating. She scrambled away from him, but her eyes fell on Dirthamen’s symbol sewed into his uniform and her panic vanished, replaced with relief. He secured his arms around her and she clung onto him and whimpered, her aura fluctuating and flitting through different emotions. He coaxed his aura against hers soothingly.

“You’re safe now, da’len,” he whispered. “I’ve destroyed the monster. Let’s get you out of here.” He carried her and pushed off, floating back up. She held onto him the whole walk back. They passed the area where he’d left Envy, but the demon was long gone.

The girl’s family was waiting outside, fretting. Their neighbours had gone out to watch, either curious or wishing to support the family.

Her family ran towards them, weeping. Lavellan passed the little girl over to them and she clung onto her weeping mother. He took a step back and let the family reunite.

The girl’s mother looked at him, smiling through her tears. “Thank you.”

Lavellan smiled back and tipped his head, then arranged for a healer to have a look at the little girl. After, he shifted into a raven and flew back to Dirthamen to report of his success.

The El'amelan's fortress was situated on the mountains near the sea cutting into the centre of Elvhenan. The fortress was once an abandoned outpost so Lavellan had claimed it with Dirthamen's blessing, and then, they'd turned it into a home. Vedir had taken it upon themselves to handle the interior decoration because, "If I leave it up to you, you'll put up black curtains and a few carpets and call it a day."

Since Vedir didn't go on missions, they had plenty of time to go through the fortress and decorate. It was their work that made the fortress feel like home.

Beneath the afternoon sun, Lavellan and Asunara sparred in the courtyard.

He knocked Asunara down.

"Again," he said.

Asunara pushed herself up without complaint and settled back into position, daggers held out.

"You do not have the brute strength to overpower your opponents," he said, "so think of your other options." He stepped in and struck without relent, pushing her into a defensive. She gritted her teeth. He said nothing else, let her formulate a strategy.

He thrust his dagger.

She side-stepped, spun on her heel, and slammed her elbow into his back. Lavellan staggered forward.

"Good," he praised. She relaxed. "But—"

He placed his hand on the ground to anchor himself and swept his foot out. She tripped over it and fell.

"It's not over until they're incapacitated," he said.

Asunara groaned to herself and he chuckled, holding out a hand. She grabbed it and he pulled her up.

She slammed her shoulder into him and he toppled backwards.

Lavellan's back hit the ground and he stared up at the sky, dazed. Asunara's grinning face came into view.

"It's not over until they're incapacitated," she echoed.

He chuckled. "Good."

She was twenty-four now. Twelve years since he'd taken her in. She would be ready to graduate into the El'amelan's ranks soon.

Lavellan pushed himself up, about to say something, but approaching footsteps caught their attention and they looked towards the source of the sound.

Asunara knelt and Lavellan pushed himself up into a kneeling position.

“Ma Venuralas,” they said in unison.

“Rise,” said Dirthamen.

They rose.

Dirthamen smiled at them. “I apologise for cutting your lesson short.” He looked at Lavellan. “But someone wishes to see you.”

He frowned. “Who?”

“A little girl has asked if she could see the man who saved her life. Do you recall the face you wore during your mission?”

Lavellan’s heart warmed. “Ah,” he said, voice falling soft, then cleared his throat. “Yes, I do.”

Dirthamen nodded and gestured for Lavellan to follow. Lavellan gave Asunara a set of tasks to complete, then followed Dirthamen, changing his face to the one he had worn during the Ga’amanir mission.

They used the eluvians to return to Dirthamen’s largest temple in Arlathan and exited out into one of its gardens.

A little girl whose blonde hair was in a braid was sitting by the fountain, looking at the neat hedges and creative arrangement of the flowers in awe. She looked healthier now, no longer as emaciated as she’d been when he’d found her.

Dirthamen lingered back and stayed out of sight as Lavellan approached them. The little girl ran towards him and hugged him again, her aura fluttering a happy yellow. Her mother stood in alarm and tried to pull her away from him.

“I am terribly sorry, Mirthadra,” said her mother. “We do not mean to be disrespectful.”

“You are not being disrespectful, it’s alright,” he assured. The mother faltered, but she stopped trying to pull the little girl back. He knelt so he could look the little girl in the eyes and smiled. “Hello,” he said.

She transmitted her joy through her aura, brushing it against his, and with the joy came a wash of gratefulness. But she never once uttered a word. Her vocal cords must still be healing.

“You’re very welcome.” He ruffled her hair. “How are you doing?”

Her aura flickered in colour, from yellow to a muddy mix, and he felt the agitation from fitful nights, felt the roll of helplessness and claustrophobia. Felt such a strong, prevalent fear that she would be harmed once again, and nobody would ever know, and she would be lost forever.

“No, da’len.” Lavellan let his aura of calm touch hers. The fitfulness of her aura eased back. “If any monsters come back, I will destroy them again.”

Her aura pulsed. *Promise?*

“I promise,” he said.

She smiled, reached into her tiny satchel, and pulled out a small, glazed clay figurine of a raven. She offered it to him.

“For me?” he asked, couldn’t quite stop his surprise from spilling into his aura.

She nodded aggressively.

He accepted it, heart warm. “Thank you,” he murmured. “What is your name, da’len?”

She pointed at one of the roses.

“Litha’ra?” he asked. She nodded again. He set the raven figurine down. “Litha’ra, what is your favourite flower?”

Litha’ra pointed at the rose again.

He chuckled. “Ah, of course. I understand. Roses *are* quite beautiful, aren’t they?” He cupped his hand and felt for the moisture in the air, collecting the water droplets, shaping it into a rose while Litha’ra watched in rapt attention. Lavellan froze it. The ice rose hovered in the air and he drew a magic circle around it. The circle flashed gold and dissipated, and the rose gained a subtle, iridescent sheen.

Lavellan offered it to her and she took it, running her fingers over the petals, mouth slightly slack.

“This rose is made of ice,” he said, “but it will never feel too cold, and it will never melt, no matter how hot it gets. And...” He picked up the raven figurine and cast a linking spell. The raven flashed gold. “If you’re ever in danger, ask the rose for help and this little raven will let me know. I’ll come to you as soon as I can.”

Litha’ra smiled and hugged him again.

Lavellan shared a few words with her mother afterwards, accepting her profuse and teary gratitude. He taught Litha’ra’s mother a few basic spells of protection to allay Litha’ra’s fears.

They soon left, escorted by one of the priests. Litha’ra waved goodbye enthusiastically, her ice rose clutched tight to her chest, and Lavellan waved back with a small smile. He looked down at the raven figurine in his hand, still smiling, then glanced back at Dirthamen.

Dirthamen was leaning against one of the columns with his arms crossed, regarding Lavellan with a look Lavellan couldn’t decipher. The look morphed into a softer expression once their gazes met, a ghost of a smile on his lips. Lavellan walked back to him.

“I was not... expecting that,” said Lavellan. “I am used to being feared or disliked, but...” He looked at the figurine and couldn’t stop himself from smiling again.

“It is a good feeling to be thanked,” said Dirthamen. “To see the fruits of your labour and see the impact you have made.”

Lavellan traced the edges of the figurine. “This is what I’m fighting for,” he said. “What I’m working for. For you, and for the People.” He closed his hand over the raven with a renewed sense of purpose.

Dirthamen was staring at him with that unknown expression again.

Lavellan walked through the palace with Dirthamen, the day cheery and bright. When they turned a corridor, they passed Solas and Mythal. Dirthamen and Mythal greeted each other while Lavellan bowed at Mythal. Solas nodded at Dirthamen, his gaze warm, aura pulsing with a soft and genuine shade of gold, and Dirthamen smiled and nodded back.

Solas and Lavellan's gazes met momentarily. He didn't recognise Lavellan since his face was different so he didn't pay Lavellan much attention, but the sight of Solas' face still made irritation simmer beneath Lavellan's skin. He ignored Solas as they walked past them.

Dirthamen chuckled beside him.

"It is not funny, ma Venuralas," said Lavellan. "If I ever talk to him again, it would be too soon."

"Perhaps you should converse with him when you are not on a mission. You may find his company enjoyable. If you ever wish to discuss philosophy or history, he is a wonderful conversational partner."

Lavellan frowned to himself. Yes, perhaps. Because Solas was Wisdom, and he had crossed as Wisdom.

"It is strange," Lavellan murmured. "Mythal would not make such a short-sighted decision, would she? It simply isn't a good idea to assign a military task to someone like him. Valour, Command, Glory... they would all be better suited."

"Never contest a god," Dirthamen teased.

"I was not."

"You have 'I disagree' written all over your face." He smiled. "Come now, what ails you?"

Lavellan crossed his arms and dug his fingers into them. "He is Wisdom."

"Yes?"

It wasn't right for her to assign him to a task so diametric to his nature, but Lavellan held his tongue. "Nothing. Apologies. It's... an unorthodox choice, is all."

Dirthamen eyed Lavellan though his look wasn't one of displeasure. "Indeed. Who knows the ways of Mother's mind? But if I have learned anything, it's that her outlandish choices tend to work out in the end."

But at what cost? he almost asked but again, he held his tongue. Walls had ears.

"I still don't like him. There are better people to discuss philosophy and history with. Like you."

"I enjoy those discussions with you, too."

Lavellan smiled to himself, and together, they walked through the palace's corridors, the arcade of arches along the outer walls exposing the corridor to the sunny air outside.

A raven appeared in the skies. It flew in through the open arches and perched on Dirthamen's shoulders, whispering in his ear. Dirthamen's serene expression turned grim, and he glanced at Lavellan. Something in Lavellan's stomach sank.

“It’s the town of Ga’amanir,” said Dirthamen. “The demon still lingers. It has killed a prominent courtier of Elgar’nan’s while they were visiting.”

“The de— But I killed Envy. Were there two separate demons?”

“No, they had only sensed one signature presence.”

If not Envy, then a demon capable of impersonating other demons—

“Guile,” they realised in unison.

Guile. Of course, how could he have been so careless? In his haste to save Litha’ra, he hadn’t stayed to confirm that Envy had returned to the Beyond. Guile could only be banished if it was in its true form.

Lavellan felt a pulse of magic within his pocket. He pulled out the raven figurine, outlined by a soft, golden glow.

“I need to go,” Lavellan whispered.

The raven cawed into Dirthamen’s ear again. Dirthamen closed his eyes and let out a breath.

“My father has taken matters into his own hands,” said Dirthamen. “He has already given the orders to purge the whole town. To excise the demon.”

A cold, gripping wave washed over him.

“No!” he cried and shifted into a raven, already flying out.

“Lavellan!” Dirthamen called out but Lavellan was already too far.

He was too late.

Lavellan stood in the middle of the wreckage of what was once Ga’amanir, the houses charred, still smoking, all signs and sounds of life gone. The raven figurine was no longer outlined in gold.

He moved through the town numbly, his feet leading him back to Litha’ra’s house. Or what was once her house. It was now nothing but crumbled walls and blackened rubble, some embers still smouldering within the wood. He entered, stepping over a pile of debris.

Lavellan turned the corner.

He stopped.

Four bodies lay charred on the ground.

Lavellan approached hesitantly.

The smallest body had a rose made of ice clutched tight to their chest.

“This rose will never melt.”

He fell to his knees.

“I promise.”

Lavellan stared, unmoving, his thoughts halting. He wasn't certain how long he stayed there for, how long he stared at nothing, how long he said nothing, how long... How long...

There was a tightness in his chest. A tightness in his entire body.

“I promise.”

Liar.

The sound of flapping wings approached, then the flapping became footsteps.

“Lavellan,” Dirthamen murmured behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder, but Lavellan couldn't feel it.

“He didn't even wait,” he whispered. “I could have— He could have sent me again— One of his courtiers die, so he burns an entire town?” Was *this* how Elgar'nan cared for his people?

Dirthamen said nothing.

But no, it wasn't even that, was it? Elgar'nan wouldn't have felt the need to purge the town if his courtier hadn't died, and the courtier wouldn't have died if Lavellan had done his job right.

Litha'ra and her family and this town wouldn't have died if he had done his job right.

“I was careless,” said Lavellan. He rose. “I had overlooked something so simple. My mistakes have...” He gritted his teeth and gripped the raven figurine, the numbness giving way to a sharp burn. What the fuck was he doing?

“Lavellan, this was not your fault.”

“It was,” he said with a calm he couldn't feel, “It isn't over until the enemy is incapacitated. I didn't wait to see if Envy had returned to the Beyond. Had I stayed, I would have seen that it hadn't, and I would have deduced it was Guile and I could have hunted it down properly. This wouldn't have happened.”

“My father acted without thought and didn't deign to consult with anyone. The blame is not with you.”

“I made a mistake. My position means I cannot afford mistakes. What use is an arrow that cannot fly straight? A blade that cannot cut?” He turned and Dirthamen retracted his hand. “I need to be better.”

“Lavellan, you are grieving. You must take the time to calm yourself.”

“I have failed you, and I have failed the People. I will ensure it never happens again.”

Never again.

Lavellan stared down at the night lights of Arlathan from the battlements of one of the floating watch towers. His mind was empty save for the whispers of the secrets in his head. He should dispense them soon...

An emerald light glowed in his periphery, accompanied by the scent of spilled ink and rain-soaked ruins.

“Wisdom,” he said.

“Some assign the blame onto an external influence,” said Wisdom, hovering beside him. “Some assign it onto something within their control, such as themselves.” Wisdom looked out over the city with him. Its presence differed in the waking world. *Her* presence. Wisdom held more definition in the waking world, but she still looked soft enough to curl with the wind. “My friend blames those who sit upon the throne. You blame yourself.”

“I have no desire to discuss psychology or philosophy right now,” he said.

“I am not here to discuss either of those. I am here to offer comfort to a friend who is perhaps experiencing grief for the first time.”

“I’m not grieving.”

She hummed. “You have only proven my point.”

“This isn’t very comforting.”

“So you admit you require comfort?” she asked.

“No. Even if I did, what comfort could there be to offer? I made a mistake, and mistakes come with consequences. I am merely dealing with those consequences.”

She looked back at him, the echoes of her face gentle. “Results and consequences are not the sole indicators of success. You have given her hope, even in her final hours.”

“She died hoping. The hope was for nothing. I was too late.” He glanced at her. “Is that indicator of success enough for you?”

The wind howled between them.

“Change,” she murmured, “it is alright to stop moving momentarily.”

“I have work to do,” he said, securing his mask over his face.

Wisdom sighed. “I shall speak with you later.”

“Farewell.”

She returned to the Beyond, leaving Lavellan alone with the harsh whispers of the secrets curling in his head.

Lavellan planted a rose bush in the El’ras’amelan’s garden.

He later took on another mission despite Dirthamen's insistence that he needed a break. Lavellan made sure not a single hair was out of place in the plans.

No mistakes.

He named one of his daggers Litha'ra.

No mistakes.

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan is still a softie to children in both lives.

He also still deals with grief the same way in both lives -- with self-blame and/or busying himself with work! Ouch.

The white huntress

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

|???, *Elvhenan* | 601 FA |

Trees snapped in half as the large creature bounded across the forest and left a trail of destruction in its wake, chasing a woman in white. She fired silver blasts of magic at it, but the creature's plated hide absorbed most of the damage. Lavellan flew after them as a giant raven, scratched at the creature with his talons, but its hide was too thick. For a beast with such cumbersome and heavy-looking plates, it sure moved fast.

It stood on its hind legs and swiped at Lavellan with its sharp claws.

Lavellan wove between its slashes. He flapped his wings and sent a torrent of wind at the creature.

It skidded back, the trees behind it falling.

A large magic circle flashed beneath the creature. Ethereal chains shot up from the ground and bound it. The creature roared, strands of saliva dripping from its many rows of teeth, struggling against the chains, but they held.

The woman raised her arms. More magic circles appeared around the creature, caging it.

She brought her hands down.

The creature staggered, its roars turning choked. Its body shuddered.

Then it fell, unmoving.

Lavellan descended onto the ground and shifted back to his true form, watching the woman examine the fallen creature. Her robes were dirtied, and her long, white hair was in a disarray. Dirt and dried blood had smeared over her pale skin.

He frowned and approached her.

"The plates were good at deflecting magic, and their weight had no impact on mobility," said the woman, knocking on said plates.

"What?" he asked.

"But it was a brute, no intelligence. Limited sentience. Driven by a need to destroy its creator." She turned to him. "Isha'belsal'in, Ras'virelan. A story come to life, or a life turned into a story? Which is worse?"

He stopped walking. "How did you know who I was?"

"I pride myself on my skills of observation and inference." She clambered over the creature's thick arm and climbed.

“You created this beast?”

“I did.”

“Whatever for?”

She reached its head and examined its eyes, which was almost half her size, and tutted. “Swift deterioration. I have to work quick to salvage parts.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“One thing at a time, if you please.”

He blinked, growing more puzzled by the second, but he heeded her request and stayed quiet as she examined the creature. She stuck her head in its maw, held up its tail and inspected its underside, checked the base of its claws, and walked along its back to feel its spines. After her... examination, she got off the creature and finally approached him.

“It is a gift,” she said.

“The creature?”

“Yes. Attempts anyway. I wish to make a perfect creature to offer Andruil.”

“I see. And what do you intend for Lady Andruil to do with them?”

“Hunt them.”

He frowned. Ah, so it was her. “You are the White Huntress, then.”

One of Andruil’s best hunters. It was said that Andruil favoured her and would always choose her as a companion during her hunts, but nobody knew who this companion was. She would always wear an unnerving mask made of sutured bone and would always disappear after hunts. They only knew her by her long locks of white hair, pale skin, and her trademark mask.

“Rather irritating name, is it not?” she asked. “White. Because I am pale and my hair is white? How fallow.” She dusted off her robes. “I am Ghilan’nain. What brings you here, O mysterious raven?”

“I heard the rather loud sound of trees breaking and came to investigate. Then I find a creature I’ve never seen before chasing a woman, who turned out to be its creator.”

“Concern, then. There is no concern needed, but I appreciate you offering a distraction. It would have taken me much longer to subdue it otherwise.” She paused. “I have tried creatures of earth and water. Perhaps I should make one of the skies. Surely she would have trouble hunting it if it were flying. Ah, but her aim is unlike anything I have ever seen. She could fell the smallest of creatures from a great distance away.”

“Why are you creating creatures for Andruil to hunt?”

“I overheard her saying she is bored from the lack of a challenge. I understand how abhorrent boredom is. You would, would you not?”

He recalled his aimless wandering in the Beyond and pressed his lips together.

“I appreciate your help,” she said. “I must be going now. I have to note down my findings and

begin anew.”

“Why would you go through the trouble of allaying Andruil’s boredom?”

“Why?” Ghilan’nain smiled. “Because I admire her.”

Admire? “She *is* a skilled hunter.”

“No,” said Ghilan’nain. “Not only that.” Her aura brushed against his, an invitation to examine it. He accepted it and felt a gentle rush of wind flitting through his lungs that somehow sat heavy over his heart. Surges, like winking stars. There was a familiarity to it, but it felt different. Like being offered your favourite food but the colours were different, and the taste was both off-putting and enticing.

Ghilan’nain stared at him, waiting.

“You love her,” he said.

“As the arrow loves its mark.” She waved a hand and walked back. “I have to go. Leave the carcass, I’ll be back for it.”

He blinked at her retreating back. “Farewell.”

“I met a very peculiar girl,” said Lavellan after reporting to Dirthamen.

“Oh?”

He told him about Ghilan’nain and the creature she’d made for Andruil.

Dirthamen snorted after the story. “Ah, so that is the hunter that my sister has been bragging my ears off about.”

“These creatures of hers concern me. They may cause harm. What do you wish to do about them?”

“I will consult with Mother. For now, leave the two be. It is a very unorthodox form of courting, but my sister has never been orthodox with her...” His gaze darkened. “Methods.”

Lavellan chuckled. “You’re not still mad about that, are you? It’s been more than a century.”

“You hadn’t known she was planning to bed you. You weren’t even aware of what that entailed.”

“I learned new things. And I enjoyed it.”

Dirthamen looked as if he wished to argue further, but he left it be and moved on from the subject. But the faint traces of a troubled look remained.

Five years of this unorthodox courtship, the destruction of most of Ghilan'nain's creations due to their volatility, and an apotheosis later, Andruil and Ghilan'nain got married. The whole of Elvhenan celebrated.

They spared no expense with the feast. The largest room in the palace had been decorated to look like the forest, and a few forest creatures had even been let loose. Everyone was free to shoot the hares and deer and cook it themselves over the numerous fires in the room. Everyone had dressed to match the theme of the Hunt. Dirthamen was wearing a raven skull headpiece and a hunting attire made of red-dyed leather, the mantle of his cloak lined with hawk and raven feathers. He looked good.

"What just happened?" Lavellan asked, perched on Dirthamen's shoulders as a raven because he could stay close to Dirthamen and guard him this way without things like rank and appearances getting in the way.

"I believe it's called a marriage," Dirthamen murmured into his goblet of wine.

"It feels like I blinked and missed something. Don't courtships last for decades?"

"Have you ever known my sister to be patient?"

Andruil, already drunk, was hollering at her table. She slung her arm around Ghilan'nain and gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. Ghilan'nain smiled and didn't seem to mind.

Dirthamen smiled at them.

Andruil caught him staring and cupped her hand beside her mouth. "Brother, when's your marriage?"

"Already married to his work!" Falon'Din yelled from the adjacent table, also already drunk. Those who heard laughed.

"Marry again!" said Andruil. "Your spouse is a bore!"

Dirthamen sighed to himself.

Once the night devolved into drunken antics, Dirthamen excused himself from the feast.

"Not feeling up to watching Andruil drunkenly shoot at a boar?" Lavellan teased.

"Not feeling up to playing peacekeeper once she offends Sylaise in some way or form again," he muttered. "Those two are always at each other's throats."

He walked past the eluvian that would lead to his wing of the palace. Lavellan looked at him in question.

"The eluvian would be faster."

"I wish to stroll back to my wing instead."

"That is a long walk."

He chuckled. "Indeed. Will you walk with me?"

Lavellan waited until they were in a less-crowded part of the palace before flying off Dirthamen's shoulder and shifting back. It was a good thing he was already masked and in uniform because he was using his true face and he wasn't bothered to change it. He hadn't even participated in the party, yet he was already exhausted.

"Are you not tired?" asked Lavellan. "You were making political arrangements during the feast, too." Him and Mythal. Those two always seemed to be working. That was who Dirthamen had gotten it from, Lavellan supposed.

"Alas, there is no such thing as resting when it comes to politics."

They walked through one of the smaller gardens. The runes bordering the stones of the path glowed and lit their way. Orbs of light danced in the air, and the waters of the fountain sang a soft and sweet song. There was nobody here. Lavellan took his mask off.

"There is if you get them all drunk," said Lavellan. "Your siblings seem to have discovered this secret."

Dirthamen laughed and Lavellan smiled. Many have built an image of Dirthamen as a cold and immovable figure, mysterious, someone who never laughed.

Have they considered that maybe they just weren't very funny? If you wanted to see someone laugh, give them a reason to.

They left the garden and entered an area of the palace that Lavellan now recognised. They moved through corridors, over artistically carved bridges, and finally, over the bridge of crystal and twisted wood that connected to one of the large isles floating near the palace.

Dirthamen's wing had been built on the isle, almost like a small palace of its own. The other Evanuris' isles could be seen in the distance.

Lavellan walked backwards to marvel at the full expanse of the palace's main bulk behind them, the crystals on the façade of the walls gleaming under the moonlight.

He turned back around once they reached the large arboreal gates on Dirthamen's isle. The guards saluted and let them through. Dirthamen did use the eluvian waiting at the front courtyard this time, and they stepped into his network.

The Crossroads of his network was eternally set at night, but luminescent rivers cut through the land with a soft, violet light. Exotic plants flowered along the riverbanks, the veins in their leaves glowing. One must walk with utmost surety in this realm since the paths weren't visible, stretching a few feet above the waters. If you started fearing that you would fall, then the path would vanish.

They walked over the river, felt solid air beneath their feet.

All the rivers flowed back into a lake, where a bleached, white tree towered in the middle. The eluvian to Dirthamen's private quarters had been carved into its great trunk. They walked through that mirror and exited into an atrium with four, large doors, one of which led into Dirthamen's bedchamber.

Dirthamen waved a hand. The engraved design on his bedchamber door flashed red, and the door opened. Lavellan flicked his wrist and lit the crystals in his ceiling for him.

That was a wonderful walk. The night air had cleared his mind.

“Do you wish for me to stay or leave?” asked Lavellan, the door closing behind them.

“Whichever you wish to do.”

Lavellan hesitated. Well... he supposed he wanted to stay for a while longer.

“Two of your siblings have been married now,” said Lavellan. “Ah, I suppose you’re technically married too, according to them.”

Dirthamen grunted as he removed his headpiece. Lavellan bit back a smile.

“Although, they encouraged divorce, and I am almost inclined to agree,” Lavellan continued. “I don’t think you’ve taken a break lately.”

Dirthamen glanced at him. “Neither have you.”

“That’s different. I can’t afford to take a break, *you* can. In fact, I encourage you to.”

“Lavellan, of course you are allowed a break. If you ask for it, I will grant it.”

Lavellan sat on one of the windowsills. “I’m not in dire need of one. I’m fine.”

Dirthamen frowned at him. “I would caution you against waiting for it to become dire. Starting tomorrow, you will take a break for two weeks.”

He sat up. “Ma Venuralas—”

“That is an order.”

Lavellan opened his mouth to argue, closed it, then slumped back against the window and looked out of it with a displeased pull to his mouth.

“Are you sulking?”

“I do not sulk.”

“I said I will not let you fall into Entropy. This is one way of ensuring that.”

Lavellan said nothing. Dirthamen was right, but still.

He watched the sprawl of Arlathan’s night life instead, the lights still bright because of the wedding celebrations, but his focus shifted to Dirthamen’s faint reflection on the window. Dirthamen pulled his cloak off his shoulders and draped them over the foot of his bed. He stepped behind a divider and started getting changed.

“Do you want me to call for attendants?” asked Lavellan.

“I am perfectly capable of undressing myself.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, mildly teasing. “That hunting gear has an awful lot of buckles and straps.”

“I know my way around buckles and straps, Lavellan.”

Lavellan chuckled and left him to it, looking out the window again and counting the floating isles

he could see.

Their relationship may be unorthodox, but Ghilan'nain and Andruil seemed to understand one another in a way nobody else could. They spoke a language of their own with each other. He recalled the aura Ghilan'nain had shared with him when they'd first met.

"Have you ever considered marriage?" asked Lavellan.

He heard a loud thud, followed by a soft curse.

Lavellan glanced at the divider. "Are you alright?"

"I dropped— Never mind," said Dirthamen. "No, I have not considered marriage. There is nobody that I wish to be betrothed to."

"Oh, yes, I suppose there's that." He laughed. "I skipped a few steps with my question."

"That, you did."

"Backtracking, have you ever felt romantic affection towards anyone before?"

Dirthamen paused.

"Ah, no," said Lavellan. "My apologies, that was too personal."

"...In my youth," Dirthamen answered softly. "There were a few who had caught my attention."

"What happened?"

"I did not tell most of them. Those I did court were... It was not meaningful, in the end. And now, I am simply too preoccupied with other things, and I am in no particular hurry to find someone."

Lavellan nodded. It was true, there was no hurry. And one could still live a fulfilling life with or without a romantic partner.

"And you?" asked Dirthamen. "Any romantic endeavours?"

Lavellan snorted. "No. I am content for now."

Dirthamen stepped out from behind the divider, already changed. Guess he did know his way around buckles and straps. "Life makes unexpected turns. If the opportunity presents itself some day?"

"It would be dangerous, wouldn't it? Considering my job?" Lavellan murmured. "The more attachments I have, the more danger I invite for myself and for them."

"Attachments are always a danger, Lavellan." He walked to his table and poured himself a glass of water. "Forming them is a risk. I suppose I am fortunate that I am attached to powerful people. They can fend for themselves."

Maybe that was what Lavellan was doing with the El'amelan. They were the only attachments he could think of, discounting Dirthamen. They had to be able to take care of themselves.

He remembered a faded raven figurine made of clay and a rose that would never melt.

Lavellan looked out the window again.

“Better not to risk it, then,” said Lavellan.

“Sometimes, there are a few who are worth the risk.”

Lavellan frowned at Dirthamen, who was staring down at his glass of water.

“Or so they say,” said Dirthamen. “I cannot say I have personal experience in the matter. But I think, if I were ever placed in a position of having to risk something for someone I love, I would do it.”

“Start a war?” Lavellan joked.

Dirthamen looked up at him, solemn and serious. “If pushed.”

Dirthamen gifted Andruil and Ghilan’nain one of his lands, the one beside the river in southwestern Elvhenan.

Lavellan’s gift wasn’t as grand, but he had a feeling Ghilan’nain in particular would like it.

He passed Ghilan’nain the box he was carrying. She took it from him, sending him a curious look upon hearing the snuffling noises from inside. When she opened the box, a creature jumped out. Lavellan still wasn’t sure what it was. A hybrid between a rodent, bunny, and a feline? It hissed and unhinged its jaw, revealing needle sharp teeth and a long, forked tongue.

Whatever it was, it was one of Ghilan’nain’s old creations.

Ghilan’nain gasped in delight. “They came in a pair and I had to destroy the other. I had assumed this one had already died prior to my purging.”

“I found it near the coast, for whatever reason.”

“The salinity keeps its vision sharp.” She cradled it in her arms, scratching in between its floppy ears. It stopped hissing and nuzzled against her. She frowned. “But how will I keep it? I was bid to destroy my creatures.”

“Technically, it’s my gift. It’s rude to destroy a wedding gift.”

She hummed in thought. “I suppose. Thank you, I will remember this.”

Lavellan heard a distressed caw as he flew over the forests near the snowy mountains.

He brought the injured, dying raven to Ghilan'nain.

| Arlathan, Elvhenan | 802 FA |

Lavellan regarded the sleeping raven on Ghilan'nain's table in intrigue and slight wonder. It was completely healed.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"What did *you* have in mind?" she returned. "I have increased its physical and mental attributes, now remains one final box. How will you fill it?"

He ran his fingers over the raven's crest. Dirthamen could establish a connection with his ravens to see and hear through them, or outright control them, scattering his influence further. Lavellan wasn't powerful enough to do that on such a large scale, but having the extra pair of eyes and ears would help. Especially an animal this small yet mobile.

Not only that, but...

His nature as Change came with the volatility. He had Dirthamen's binding as a last resort, but if that failed, or if something happened to Lavellan during a mission and his soul was somehow damaged or banished to the Beyond, he needed a way to remain intact. Something that would also make crossing back into the waking world less strenuous and dangerous.

And Vedir's words from when they'd first met was something that had always lingered at the back of Lavellan's mind.

"Your large wings were torn, and you fell into the sky."

He didn't know how or when he would fall, but he needed to be ready.

"I need smaller wings," he said and met her dark eyes. "And a way to return if I am ever broken."

Ghilan'nain narrowed her eyes in thought. "You wish for a tether? No, stronger. You wish for a beacon. A compass."

"Is it possible?"

"It is, if you fragment a small part of your soul and meld it with the raven's. Forge that connection, and you have your beacon. The part of your whole. If you are powerful enough to execute such a spell, that is."

"I am."

"It is a taboo," she said, but not in reprimand.

He smiled. "Why do you think I came to you?"

Ghilan'nain regarded him. Then, she smiled back.

It was done.

Lavellan felt shaky, a touch empty. The magic circles around him vanished and he staggered, but Ghilan'nain caught him and guided him to a chair.

The raven woke up from its slumber. Her, judging by the lack of an underside crest. Lavellan felt their thread of connection, and when he focused on it, a wash of emotions battered at him. Not his.

Hers.

His eyes widened. "I feel her emotions," he said. "If I focus on our connection."

"Do you?" asked Ghilan'nain. "Fascinating. Unlike us, animals are unable to broadcast the interiority of their minds, but perhaps your connection with her has allowed you insight into her interiority. What is she feeling?"

He frowned, sorting through her emotions. The raven cawed, subdued, then cawed again, a little louder. The emotions flashing by were a mixture of alarm, curiosity, and—

Anger.

The raven screeched and flew straight for him.

"Whoa—" He ducked but she managed to scratch the exposed skin of his arms. She shrieked, flapping her wings at him. "What the— Ghilan'nain!"

Ghilan'nain just observed the interaction.

"She is only attacking you," she said. "Perhaps she thinks the joining of souls was an intrusion."

"No *shit*. I just didn't think she'd be aware of it or care so much— Ow, fuck."

"It would be best to tame her soon," she said over the cawing, still sounding composed. "I would also be cautious. I *did* augment her physical strength."

The raven tried to peck his head.

"Mythal have mercy," Lavellan muttered.

Chapter End Notes

(don't mind me having fun with ancient elven architecture and magic)

We'll be in flashback hell for a while, btw. There's quite a few things I want to answer and build up to coz we're literally dealing with thousands of years. But I am also trying to speedrun through the development within said thousands of years ;_; I am estimating ~12 chapters of flashbacks...?

Basically, I'm trying to hit a balance with condensed information, but not so condensed that important development gets skimmed. Lmao, wish me luck.

Anyway, next chapter will be focusing on our feathered friend.

Also, series name change! Coz I ended up really liking that "oh my love, your back is bruised from what you carry" line a few chapters back coz it's applicable to a lot of people actually. everyone here's just fucking burdened (._.)

Birds of a feather

Chapter Notes

I am aware it's April Fools and I was gonna publish this chapter in a cipher as a prank but I'm too tired to bother hahsdf--

(Also, goddamn we've reached 400k words haha--)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *The El'ras'amelan's fortress, Elvhenan* | 802 FA |

Lavellan carried the cage that the raven was in, ignoring her squawks of protest.

“Smelly!” she cawed. “Smelly!”

“I’m going to roast you.”

“Idiot! Stupid! Idiot!”

He went straight to the one person who had a knack for taking care of animals.

“Vedir!” Lavellan called as he entered Vedir’s area of the fortress. “Bel’vedir!”

“Coming!”

Lavellan exited out onto one of the smaller courtyards, and Vedir came out from one of the doors. They smiled at Lavellan.

“Ras,” they greeted. A mouse peeked out from under their collar. “Did you need me for—”

Their gaze fell on the irate raven, and their eyes glazed over. Lavellan waited. Vedir blinked after a few seconds.

“Vision?” asked Lavellan.

Vedir’s abilities were difficult to control. They never knew when they would get their visions, either from the past, present, or future. The further away from the present it was, the more abstract it would be. Vedir could scry for a specific vision, too, and while it would be clearer, it took a lot of magic and strength. The El'amelan would sometimes ask Vedir for visions near the present, pertaining to jobs, if needed.

Over the years, Vedir had gotten better at interpreting the abstract visions, but they still couldn't tell Lavellan any details about his supposed ‘fall’. Too bright, and too dark all at once, Vedir had said. Whatever that had meant.

Vedir rubbed their eyes. “Yes. About what you just did, actually. I understand why you did this, and it may be useful for the future, but I still don’t agree with the method. You do not meld souls

like that, Ras! I—” They sighed and shook their head. “What’s done is done. Apologise to her.”

Lavellan blinked. “What?”

“You wronged her. Apologise.” They crossed their arms, frowning. “Animals aren’t any less deserving of fair treatment just because they don’t experience the world as we do.”

Lavellan gave the raven a dubious look, but Vedir was watching him with a displeased scrunch to their brows, so he set the cage down. He crouched so he could look at the raven. She flew at the bars of the cage, trying to scratch at him through the gaps. Wave after wave of her anger barraged him, but in between that... fear.

The stirrings of guilt plucked at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Smelly!”

“Is it permanent?” asked Vedir.

“It is. She only dies now if we both die. So long as one remains in the waking world, the other can return.”

Vedir passed their hand over their face with a small groan.

After the anger came despondence. The raven refused to move. She didn’t eat, didn’t drink, but it didn’t matter because she could never die from hunger or thirst.

Lavellan had made a space for her in his bedchamber — no cage. Just a perch and various items that would stimulate her or provide comfort. But nothing. He chewed on his lip and frowned as he watched her.

“You’re free to go,” said Lavellan. “You have no chains. I won’t keep you here.”

She didn’t respond.

But she wasn’t truly free, was she?

Lavellan had no idea what to do now. Neither did Vedir.

He sighed and walked through the eluvian in the corner of his room. It was a special eluvian in that its network was small and only had one other eluvian within that network — an eluvian connecting to a hidden corridor in Dirthamen’s room.

Lavellan made his way through the misty Crossroads and entered the other eluvian a short distance away. He exited out into the hidden corridor and knocked at the wall at the end of it.

The outline of a door glowed on the wall and Lavellan pushed it open, entering Dirthamen’s chamber.

His chamber was large and spacious with a loft that housed shelves filled with a staggering amount

of books and scrolls. Dirthamen was leaning against the loft's railings, reading a book hovering in front of him.

Lavellan bowed. "Ma Venuralas," he greeted.

Dirthamen nudged the book and it drifted aside, giving him a clear view of Lavellan. "You seem troubled."

Lavellan checked his aura, but he had it hidden.

Dirthamen chuckled. "Auras are not everything. You move a certain way when you are agitated."

"I do?" he asked, tensing. That was a tell. He had to—

"Calm, Lavellan," he soothed. "I could tell because I know you well. You have not given yourself away."

Lavellan relaxed slightly. Dirthamen flicked his wrist and the book flew back to its place. He vaulted over the railing and jumped down, slowing his descent so he could touch down softly, robe fluttering behind him. Graceful as always.

"You have stairs," said Lavellan, smiling.

Dirthamen waved a hand as he walked towards Lavellan. "Says the man who has a habit of flinging himself off high places. You do not get to lecture me."

"Hypocrisy is a fun activity."

"I would encourage you to partake in better activities." He stopped in front of Lavellan, smiling. "So what seems to be troubling you? I am assuming it has to do with your raven."

Lavellan nodded. "She's... despondent. I don't regret very many things, but this is one of them." He crossed his arms and frowned. "I thought she'd be a very useful tool to have, but she's a living being with her own will. What I've done is well irreversible."

Dirthamen stared at Lavellan with a small frown. He was quiet for a long time.

"Ma Venuralas?" asked Lavellan.

Dirthamen clasped his hands behind his back and looked out at his large window.

"There may be regrets regarding the circumstance you now find yourself in," said Dirthamen, "but I suppose all you can do now is..." He looked down, seeming troubled and introspective. "Show her she is more than a tool. Treat her like a companion, a friend, rather than a..." He blinked, then looked back at Lavellan with a soft smile. "Build trust, give her time. However, this is not guaranteed to work. She may still resent you."

Lavellan sighed. "That's fine," he murmured.

He started talking to her. Just idle chatter. Every day, he'd offer her food from his hand. She still wouldn't eat, but he remained patient, and he could only hope that she could feel his remorse.

Even though she hadn't been flying, Vedir said her flight muscles weren't weakening at all. It must be a part of the physical enhancement Ghilan'nain had done.

She broke her silence one evening after he'd yammered on about the current courtly gossip. She didn't use auras to communicate. It wasn't a telepathic conveyance of words either. It was more of a... mental connection. A communication of intent. He couldn't explain it. He simply understood her, and he assumed she understood him in turn.

Why do you bother? she asked.

"I can't take back what I've done," he said, "so I'm trying to make amends. If you resent me forever, I understand." He offered food again. "Please eat? You haven't eaten anything in weeks. You may not need food to survive, but you still feel hunger. I promise it's nice."

She stared at the grains in his hand.

Then pecked his palm until the skin broke and bled.

He sighed.

Lavellan didn't let up.

Go away, she conveyed.

He offered the blueberries. "After you eat."

I don't need to.

"Like I said, you still feel hunger. I won't leave until you eat."

She said nothing, but she pecked at his palm some more until it bled.

"Annoying," she cawed.

Lavellan just waited patiently, grains in his hand.

The raven finally ate a few grains.

He smiled.

She then pecked at his fingers until they bled. He let her.

He came back to his room one night and found that it had been thrashed. The raven watched him from her perch.

Lavellan sighed and set things back in order.

“At least you’re flying again,” he said.

The raven said nothing.

I’m stuck with you.

Lavellan finished wiping the blood off his fingers from today’s feeding session. “Yes, in a spiritual sense. But you are free to leave.”

I feel your sorrow.

He paused.

Your hope, your love, your fears.

She turned away from him.

Even if I leave, I will always feel what you feel. I now know too much. Understand too much. What am I now?

Lavellan had no answer.

Lavellan flew into his room through the balcony doors and shifted back.

You land funny, said the raven.

“Do I?”

She shifted on her perch. He noticed that one of the puzzle boxes had been opened.

Your feathers flutter after you land. Don’t. Crows do that, not ravens. You’ll give yourself away.

“Can you show me?”

The raven shifted again. He tuned into their connection so he could sense her emotions and felt her hesitation.

“Just a quick one,” he promised.

The hesitation gave way to wary acceptance.

Like this, she said.

He shifted back into a raven and followed her lead.

“Fly with me?” he asked.

Another wave of wariness hit him.

Why...?

“I like flying. I’ve never flown with anyone before though. Tell me where you haven’t been, and we can go there.”

The raven looked outside, then back at him. She shuffled her feathers.

The western desert.

“Alright. We’ll take an eluvian there.”

“Fly with me?” he asked while she was preening.

The southern coast.

“Deal.”

“Fly with me?” he asked after she’d eaten from his hand. She’d pecked his fingers again, but not to the point of bleeding. Progress.

The plains in the south-east.

“Alright.”

Lavellan received orders to go undercover for a mission.

“I’ll be gone for half a year,” he informed the raven. “Again, you’re free to fly about. You don’t have to stay in the room. Vedir has grain if you’d like some food, or you can hunt for food on your own. I fully support you playing tricks on the others within the fortress.”

She perked up at that.

Where are you going?

“Lady Virsala’s estate, north-east. I’ll pretend to be one of the new entertainers. We suspect she’s farming blood from her servants to fuel her magic.” Lavellan scowled. Dirthamen detested people who would misuse blood magic in that manner, and Lavellan agreed. He’d asked to personally oversee the mission.

A wave of uneasiness rolled off the raven.

You’re strong, right?

“I am.”

She looked down, feathers shuffling again. *Be careful.*

Lavellan smiled and nodded.

| Lady Virsala's estate, Elvhenan | 803 FA |

He hadn’t expected to feel so tense while on his mission. Lady Virsala had a keen eye. Lavellan determined that the best way to conduct his investigation was to be unremarkable to keep her scrutiny away.

During the mission, he would sometimes tune into his connection with the raven and would often feel a pulse of mischief. She was probably tormenting the El’amelan.

He would converse with her too, sometimes. It seemed distance wasn’t an issue. She’d tell him about the current situation with his agents, and he’d talk about his mission, which let him sort his thoughts and plans out in the process. They also discovered that they couldn’t sense each other’s emotions or intent if one was asleep.

But the mission soured just as he was close to determining what the pattern was with the missing servants.

Lady Virsala herself came to see him.

That wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t meant to be noticed.

“You there,” she said, “you are a lyre player?”

“And a dancer, Mirthadra.”

She appraised him, dark eyes sharp. Then she smiled. “You will do. Come with me, I have some visiting dignitaries I’d like to honour with a song and dance.”

He didn't trust this.

"I am but a student of the arts," he said. "I am sure those with more experience than I can entertain such esteemed guests."

Her look darkened. "Are you defying my orders?"

Lavellan paused, gauging the risk.

"No, Mirthadra," he said. "May I get my instruments—"

"We already have them." She waved him off. "Come, don't dawdle."

So he couldn't get any weapons or equipment, then. Had she realised who he was, or had she chosen him as her next blood bank?

She descended into the lower floors of her estate, and they went deeper, deeper.

What should he do? If he *was* her next blood source, then he could determine where the other servants were being kept if he followed her. How much danger would he be in?

They entered the smoking room. A sweet, heady scent had filled the air, and through the coloured smoke, he could see the red silks draped over the walls and across the ceilings. His hand inched towards the hidden dagger strapped to his thigh.

"Where are the dignitaries, Mirthadra?" he asked.

"Right here."

Three of her guards appeared from the shadows and jumped him, pinned him down before he could draw the dagger. Lady Virsala smiled down at him.

Shit—

Something hit the back of his head.

He floated in and out of consciousness. Once he woke up fully, he made sure not to open his eyes and instead took stock of his surroundings through his other senses. His arms were raised over his head, his knees on the hard floor. There was something cold and tight around his wrists and ankles. Shackles. Something sweet in the air. He felt heavy. There must be something in whatever that scent was. His mana stores were also depleted.

"I know you're awake."

Lavellan opened his eyes, staring up at Lady Virsala. She looked down at him with disdain, two of her guards flanking her. The room was small and dim. A cell?

"Who sent you?" she asked.

He smiled at her.

She backhanded him. The chains rattled. There was a split second of delay before the pain hit.

“A rivalling house, likely,” Lady Virsala scoffed.

“I was sent by House Virsala,” he said.

She backhanded him again, and the rings on her hand sliced through his skin. His inner cheek cut on his teeth.

“Insolent,” she said. “But I suppose it doesn't matter who you work for now. You will never be found again. I will make sure to bleed you out especially slowly.”

How could he get out of this? His mana wasn't replenishing so he had no energy for spells. The shackles must have a mana draining enchantment.

“I would love to put you through pain,” Lady Virsala said, “but I know you will only scheme. Every moment you are awake is a danger.”

Before he could respond, his vision darkened, and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Every time he would wake, it would be to searing pain and the heavy scent of metal. Through his hazy vision, he could see his torso littered with open cuts and Lady Virsala staring him down coolly.

She'd put him back under.

Had it been days? Weeks? Months?

He couldn't think. Couldn't sustain his thoughts or formulate a thorough plan.

He'd been careless.

“Put him to sleep.”

He tried to resist the spell despite his sapped strength, gritting his teeth.

There *was* a last resort. Just... unleash all of his power, let it destroy everything and everyone around him, but it would shatter him in the process.

He had the raven, he could remain intact and return.

But was it worth it?

The spell was overpowering him. The compulsion to sleep was too powerful.

No, he had to do it. Lavellan would do it the next time he wakes.

His consciousness dipped...

We're coming!

He jolted in surprise, but the spell plunged him back into darkness.

The next time he woke up, the sweet scent in the air was gone but the metallic smell remained. His vision was swimming and blurry. He could faintly hear fighting.

Someone freed his arms, but his body couldn't support him, so he toppled forward. His rescuer caught him and let him lean against them. They were warm. They felt safe. Lavellan couldn't stay awake any longer, but it was no influence from magic. Just soreness and exhaustion.

"You are safe," murmured a honeyed voice by his ear. "Rest now."

Lavellan closed his eyes.

He woke up again, this time bright and alert. The ceiling above him was frescoed and unfamiliar.

Lavellan pushed himself up, wincing at the soreness of his body. He was in a large bed in an extravagant room, sunlight flooding in through the large windows. Where...? He looked down at himself. Someone had dressed him in a loose robe. Despite the soreness, there were no cuts on his torso. No sign of any injuries at all.

His recollection was hazy and disconnected, but he could remember being saved. By whom?

He turned his head to examine the room, but his attention fell on the black bundle beside his pillow. It was a sleeping, red-crested raven. His eyes widened. Could it be...?

Lavellan poked it cautiously.

The raven woke up and raised its head, looking at him. Lavellan sensed relief washing over him and he smiled. It *was* her!

She cawed, and her relief mixed with outrage and worry. She flew and flapped her wings at him.

You said you were strong, but I should have known you were also stupid!

Lavellan laughed, turning away so he wouldn't get a mouthful of feathers.

"Stupid!" she cawed. "Idiot! Smelly!"

"Yeah," he said, still smiling. "What are you doing here? Where... Where are we?" He looked out of one of the windows and frowned at the familiar view of the coast in the distance. They were still in Lady Virsala's estate, then.

She perched on the bedside table.

The door to the room opened and Dirthamen walked in. Lavellan got out of bed and tried to kneel, but a sharp stab of pain shot through his entire body and he staggered, fell on his hands and knees, the impact jarring him. He grimaced.

Well, this worked too.

“No, none of that,” said Dirthamen with a reprimanding tone.

Shame flushed through him. Was he disappointed? Lavellan had been careless—

Dirthamen crouched in front of him and helped him up.

“Ma Venuralas,” Lavellan started, but Dirthamen eased him towards the bed and sat him down.

“You mustn’t move too much,” he said and sat beside him. “Your injuries may have been healed, but your body is still bearing the shock of confinement, mana drain, and blood loss.”

Lavellan looked down and bit his lip, clenching his hand over his thigh. Why was Dirthamen here? Had Lavellan failed so terribly that Dirthamen himself had to come and clean up his mess? What kind of spymaster—

Dirthamen rested his hand on Lavellan’s head. “You are strong, Lavellan.”

His thoughts halted. He looked up at Dirthamen, befuddled at the praise. The situation wasn't one that would warrant it.

“You are strong, and this mission was difficult. That is why I agreed to send you. I knew Lady Virsala was powerful and cunning. Do not blame yourself.”

“But I should have been more careful. I should have had better foresight. Better calculation of risk and—” He cut himself off and took a shaky breath. “No, I apologise. This is unbecoming of me. I will not burden you with complaints. I will strive to be better, so that this may never happen again.” He couldn’t keep spiralling after every setback. He’d been too used to succeeding. This was a good reminder that he was not invincible.

Dirthamen retracted his hand and another indecipherable look crossed his face.

“How were you able to find me?” asked Lavellan. “How did you even know to look for me?”

“Your raven came to get me,” he said and smiled. Lavellan glanced at the raven. She shifted, uncomfortable from the attention. “I came with a few of the El’amelan and some of Rajelan Solas’ forces.”

Lavellan stopped himself from making a face at the mention of Solas.

“We followed your raven here. It seems she is able to sense where you are.”

You were all fluttered up, she conveyed. Had to come see. I’m still not done pecking your fingers.

Lavellan smiled.

Dirthamen stood. “I must interrogate Lady Virsala. It seems she wasn’t working alone. I believe this may be tied to someone within the cult of the Forgotten Ones.”

The Forgotten? This was bigger than he'd realised.

Lavellan tried to stand. "Allow me to—"

"Rest. And it is better for me to handle this myself. I will inform you of any further developments later, and I will send someone to provide you with food and medicine so that you may regain your strength."

He hesitated, but sat back down. "Vin, ma Venuralas."

Dirthamen nodded, then glanced at the raven and smiled at her. "Thank you. I know the circumstances of your meeting with him was less than ideal and intrusive, but..." He looked at Lavellan, his gaze softening. Or maybe Lavellan was imagining it. "He will take good care of you. He always strives to learn from and amend his mistakes."

Warmth bloomed in Lavellan's chest. He lowered his gaze.

Dirthamen murmured a farewell and Lavellan watched him go. Before Dirthamen could close the door behind him, he looked back at Lavellan.

"I am glad you are alright," said Dirthamen. Lavellan blinked, but Dirthamen had already closed the door.

They lingered in the quiet. A mild, coastal breeze swept in from the open window and swayed the translucent curtains.

The raven looked at him. "Idiot," she cawed.

"I'll roast you," he threatened, but it sounded too fond to be intimidating.

"Smelly."

Lavellan smiled and watched as a few of the El'amelan chased after the raven, who had a satchel in her claws.

Vedir sat with him on the bench. "Have you named her?" they asked.

"Been thinking about it," he said.

The raven perched on one of the trees in the courtyard, looking down at his agents as they begged for her to give back the satchel. She rummaged into it, took out a golden bangle, and dropped the satchel on their faces. Lavellan laughed.

"She's an agent of mayhem, isn't she?" Lavellan asked.

Vedir sighed. "She sure is."

"But there's a method to it."

She put the bangle over her head and preened.

“You already have a name for her?” Vedir asked.

“I do. If she wants it.” He laughed softly. “We all know I’m terrible with names.”

“Believe me, I know. I can *not* believe you wanted to name the varterral ‘Ugly’. What would Lord Dirthamen say, calling his creation ugly like that?”

“Oh, I’ve told him. He laughed.”

Vedir shook their head, chuckling.

The raven flew over to him and perched on his shoulder, the bangle glinting around her neck.

“Yes, yes, you’re very elegant,” said Lavellan and scratched the underside of her beak. “Hey, I’ve got a name for you. Tell me if you like it.”

She tilted her head. *Go on.*

“Elegant mayhem,” he said. “Vergala.”

She paused and thought it over. Then she cawed, “Vergala!”

That’s me! I like it.

She did a small hop and puffed her chest out.

Vedir smiled at them.

Chapter End Notes

Vergala my beloved.

Lavellan has a 99% success rate I promise. We're just seeing the 1% where he fucks up lol.

Vedir's one of the few people who can make Lavellan feel bad when he's disappointed them. The moment Vedir goes ☹️, Lavellan goes 😊

(Dirthamen has a "lavellan is blaming himself again" sense and his immediate response to that is to slam the compliment button. Amazing, this man.)

All that glitters

Chapter Notes

CW: Brief mentions of suicide and suicidal tendencies

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *The El'amelan's fortress, Elvhenan* | 924 FA |

Lavellan hung up another crystal lantern in his room. A red and gold one. He had a collection now, all of them floating below the ceiling. The light from dawn streamed in through the balcony and all the colourful lanterns he'd hung refracted the light, an assortment of colours striating the dark-panelled walls of his room.

He smiled. He liked awaking to the sight of this.

Someone knocked at his door. He flicked his wrist and the door opened.

Asunara was standing at the door. She saluted, smiling. "Good morning, Ras. Will you come with me? There's something we would like to show you."

"Alright," he said and followed her to the courtyard. The rest of the El'amelan were there. "What's this?" he asked.

Vedir handed Asunara a package, and she passed that on to him.

"A present," she explained. "From us."

Lavellan looked out over the El'amelan, who were waiting with a smile. He opened the package, and his eyes widened at its contents.

A cloak of raven feathers.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 1341 FA |

An entire village had been eradicated today because of a squabble between two nobles over land.

Memories of Ga'amanir returned to him. They were faded, a memory from over a thousand years ago. He'd changed daggers so many times, but he'd always name one Litha'ra. The raven figurine had been unable to withstand the test of time, but the ice rose had persisted.

It was almost mocking. That Litha'ra's gift had perished but his had persevered.

He was sneaking around a nobleman's estate, having just finished searching for evidence of illegal lyrium synthesis, when one of the servants happened upon him in the cellars.

She dropped the tray she'd been carrying, the clang of its impact strident in the silence.

Lavellan was about to leave but she lunged at him.

He unsheathed his daggers, had meant to discourage her with them, but she grabbed his hand and pulled it to her, pressing his dagger against her throat. Lavellan's eyes widened. Her sunken eyes stared back at him, glimmering in the cellar's dim light, her cheeks hollow, lips cracked.

"Please," she rasped. "Please end it, please." Her voice broke and her vallaslin shifted as her expression twisted in pain. "I can't do this anymore."

There were bruises on her bony arms and burn scars on her hands.

"*Please*," she gasped. Lavellan pulled the dagger away and stepped back from her grip, his heart resting at the bottom of his throat.

He turned to leave.

She tripped in her attempt to reach for him, and tugged at the end of his cloak instead, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I beg, I beg," she whimpered.

He considered taking her to the El'amelan, but he bit his inner cheek. No, he couldn't. The El'amelan's numbers had been capped at fifty for their own anonymity and safety. Besides, he couldn't manage too large of a group.

Lavellan crouched and gently pried her hands away.

"No," she whispered, her aura thick with despair.

He shifted into a raven and flew out of the small window. He looked back, and his heart sank at the sight of the servant curled up on the ground, weeping.

After attending to what he needed to do, Lavellan did some investigating and determined the servant girl's name. He returned a few nights later with a bag of healing salves clutched in his claws and flew in through the window of her room in the servants' quarters.

The moment he entered, he was hit with a familiar, cloying scent.

He shifted back into an elf and stood beside the bed, staring down at the servant girl on it. She was smiling faintly, holding an empty vial in her hand.

Poison.

Lavellan's grip tightened around the bag of salves.

| ???, *Elvhenan* | 1634 FA |

Lavellan stalked his mark, waited until they were alone.

And struck.

His mark put up a fight, but Lavellan was faster. They tried to crawl away from him, but Lavellan dragged them back by the hair and slit their throat.

Lavellan panted as he stood over their corpse, covered in injuries from the scuffle. He sheathed his daggers, hands slick and sticky from blood. He stared down at his bloodstained hands.

For the People, right?

He looked down at the corpse again, then closed his hands into fists, blood squeezing out through the cracks between his fingers, dripping over his knuckles.

For the People.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 1785 FA |

Dirthamen looked tired.

He'd been quieter than usual today. His responses during Lavellan's report had been subdued.

"Is something troubling you?" asked Lavellan.

Dirthamen was looking out the window again. That large window. He was the man who watched over all of Elvhenan.

"I propose a question to the spirit of Change," Dirthamen murmured.

Lavellan tilted his head. "Yes?"

"When you see someone changing, what authority do you have to declare the change bad or good?"

He already knew who the question was about. "It isn't a matter of authority; it is of concern."

"He slips further from me every day," he said. "From the moment we split apart. I do not want to stifle his independence, but it feels as though I am watching my reflection twist."

"He is not your reflection, and you are not his. You are two different souls, twins you may be. He is a pair, not a part." Lavellan stared up at the crystal veins stretching across his high ceiling, pulsing a silver glow. "Why does the change concern you?"

"He is becoming too indulgent. I worry. Purpose could..."

Purpose could become Desire.

“It is not just him,” said Dirthamen. “Everyone seems...” He looked back at Lavellan, frowning. “Have I changed for the worse, too?”

Lavellan couldn’t find an answer. He wasn’t certain what to make of the question. Dirthamen was... He was fine. Better than fine. He was perfect.

But nobody was perfect.

The two thoughts clashed in his head.

At his extended silence, Dirthamen’s gaze softened. He offered Lavellan a gentle, yet weary smile. “No, never mind that. You are dismissed for today. Rest well.”

“I... Yes, rest well, ma Venuralas.”

Lavellan left the room through the hidden corridor, throwing one last look over his shoulder.

Dirthamen was looking out his window, silhouetted against the violent orange light of dusk.

| Arlathan, Elvhenan | 1993 FA |

The same whisper rippled throughout Arlathan.

“The Wolf has rebelled!”

Lavellan’s footsteps echoed in the palace corridors.

The years had worn on. A rot was festering behind the golden walls of the palace. He’d see the silks and beautiful, moving patterns on the nobility’s robes, and would be reminded of the rough linen that those in poverty would wear.

Arlathan, the beautiful city floating in the sky, always visible no matter where you were in Elvhenan, always floating the same distance away.

A constant reminder. *I am above; you are beneath.*

Lavellan made his way to the medical wing and stopped at the door. He took a deep breath and entered. The healer on duty turned, ready to reprimand, but his eyes fell on the raven cloak and he stayed quiet instead. Lavellan walked past him, walking through more corridors lined with doors. He stopped at a particular door and entered.

The man inside was out of his bed, leaning on the windowsill and looking out of the window, the burn scars on his back peering from beneath the loose robes. Burned for his allegiance to the Rebel Wolf. Elgar’nan hadn’t allowed healing, but Mythal had at least offered the medical wing so the

soldiers could recover in their own time.

Lavellan closed the door and placed a silencing rune on it. This was not a discussion he'd wish to be overheard.

"You should have renounced him," said Lavellan. "In public, at least."

"I don't know how it works with agents but..." Shielan turned and gave him a tired smile. "Us soldiers are proud and stubborn. And stupidly loyal."

"You were hit to hurt him. You all became his liabilities."

Shielan walked over to his bed, but he moved slowly and carefully, face pulling every now and again. He eased himself down on the bed.

"Are you sure the blame lies with us," asked Shielan, "and not with the man who unleashed the flames?" He tapped his temple. "They wish for you to do that, to think it so. That the fault is with you, not with them. You say we were the liabilities, so tell me, why do you look as if you are prepared to bring the dagger to Elgar'nán's throat yourself?"

He didn't answer.

"You know he is in the wrong, this time," said Shielan. "You feel it in your heart. How long will you keep steering this sinking vessel? I know the extent of what you do. You fight so hard to keep everything afloat, to keep everyone happy. But ask yourself, *who* are you truly keeping happy? Who are you protecting?"

"The People."

"What does that even *mean*?" he hissed. "The People this, the People that. They tell us to fight for our gods, defend the empire and its People. As if we are all a singular thing with one goal. We are not the Children of the Stone. We are not a hivemind. Our needs and wants conflict. Our ambitions vary. Our strife is layered."

"I defend the People, even from themselves," said Lavellan. "We punish those who would endanger the others. We strive to keep the peace within the empire."

Shielan stared at him, then scoffed. "You sound so hollow when you say it. I can tell you're tired. How often do you say that to yourself? Does it work?"

"Shielan," he warned.

He looked out the window again. "Alright. Far be it for me to take away whatever helps you sleep at night."

Why did Lavellan even come here? He and Shielan would interact every now and again, but he wouldn't consider it a close friendship.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

Shielan broke it with a sigh. "Thanks for visiting," he murmured. It didn't sound sarcastic.

Lavellan nodded. "How is..." He shook his head. No, there was no point asking that. He'd heard Solas' screams as Elgar'nán burned his soldiers. One needn't be a genius to infer how he was doing. "I have to go. I'm unable to stay for long."

“Keep my words in mind.”

“Farewell, Shielan.”

Lavellan turned to open the door.

“I might change my name,” said Shielan.

He paused, looked back at him. “To what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Don’t be foolish with it.”

He smiled at Lavellan. “No promises. Although, I have a feeling you’ll scold me for it. And I don’t even know what it is yet.”

Three years later, Shielan changed his name to Felassan.

Lavellan did, in fact, come to scold him.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 2218 FA |

“I want you to work with Fen’Harel.”

Lavellan wanted to set himself on fire.

One of Dirthamen's largest operations entailed uncovering the identities of those within the cult of the Forgotten, and it was what Lavellan had been working on for most of the time. They’d been labouring over it for centuries, and the way to solve it all along was *Solas*?

“So let me clarify,” said Lavellan, fighting to keep his voice level. “*You* had the methods to determine who the cultists were because you had an invitation that you just kept ignoring?”

Solas flipped the small note of invitation between his fingers. His face was bare and it churned Lavellan’s stomach. “I had no desire to collude with the Forgotten.”

It was cold in Solas’ gods-forsaken fortress. Tarasyl’an, he’d called it. The place where the sky dwells. Should have called it *the place where you freeze your ass off*. It wasn’t just cold outside, it was also cold within. Empty, repelling. He had no servants, no faithful waiting at his doorstep, only a few of his old soldiers who had refused to leave his side and were now helping him create nuisances in the courts.

The very stones of this fortress dripped with misery.

Lavellan hugged himself to stay warm. They were within one of the largest rooms in the fortress, which had been turned into Solas' main room of operations. It wasn't apt to call it a War Room, but it had that feel. The remnants of his military background.

Solas sat at his desk and shot Lavellan a small, amused smile. Yes, Lavellan was freezing. Hilarious.

"You could warm yourself with a spell—"

"I'm not cold," said Lavellan.

It felt as if the room's temperature dropped further. Solas had to be doing it on purpose now. Lavellan refused to shiver.

"I have spare pelts," said Solas.

He ignored that. "You could have brought this information to the Evanuris! The cult could have been eradicated earlier."

"I have no interest in involving myself with this war."

He scowled. "You are abandoning the People."

His gaze darkened. "What would you know of my efforts to help the People?"

"How are you helping? By creating chaos within the courts? Do you know who ends up having to clean up after your messes? Not those you played tricks on. It's the servants. And do you know who works behind the scenes to preserve the peace within the political environment? *Me*."

Solas stood, the chair screeching against the floor, his aura wavering in irritability. "Then you are part of the problem."

Lavellan's blood simmered but he bit his tongue. *Play nice*.

He looked away. "You have to accept the invitation this time. I don't know what your idea of protecting the People is, but it's undeniable that cases of murders and kidnappings related to the Forgotten are on the rise. We need to determine what they're planning, ma Venuralas."

Solas recoiled at the title. "Do not," he said darkly, "call me that."

"You're an Evanuris."

"Be quiet."

Lavellan bowed. "Vin, ma Venuralas," he said, and quieted. Solas' aura flared, his eyes sparking with fury, but Lavellan didn't meet his anger with anything else but a blank look.

Solas sharply turned away and dismissed him.

Lavellan bowed again and left, smiling in petty glee once his back was turned to Solas.

The rendezvous was to take place in a temple hidden in the desert. They met with the cultists once night fell and Lavellan was allowed entry after Solas explained that Lavellan used to be one of his soldiers.

“I trust him with my life,” Solas had said and Lavellan had enough self-restraint to avoid collapsing into a fit of laughter. At least Solas could lie convincingly.

But he couldn’t hide his anger to save his life. The moment the words, “living sacrifice,” left the Head Priest’s mouth during the meeting, Solas had his hand wrapped around the man’s throat.

The rest of the cultists jumped to action and surrounded them, their magic ready.

Lavellan scanned the numbers. Too many. There was no feasible way they could overpower everybody here. He had to send for back-up.

Solas didn’t seem fazed. Did this fool have a death wish? Lavellan was about to tell Vergala via their link to inform Dirthamen, but Solas reached into his robe and pulled out a—

“You have a *focus*?” Lavellan hissed. How did he—?

The cultists cried out in panic and tried to back away.

Solas threw the Head Priest at the closest cultist and pulled Lavellan close, a barrier shimmering around them.

Lavellan's stomach sank. "Wait—"

The orb glowed.

And unlocked.

A powerful blast of light and magic ripped through the air.

The barrier shuddered.

Lavellan cursed and helped Solas strengthen it, poured most of his mana into it. He turned away from the light and closed his eyes.

It felt like a century later when the blast subsided. Lavellan opened his eyes.

The entire temple had been levelled. He and Solas stood untouched, but the others had been decimated.

"Holy shit," Lavellan murmured. He'd never seen the destructive potential of a focus before. He'd read about it, but theory could never truly prepare you for the practice.

“Are you unharmed?” asked Solas.

“I— Yes, yes I— Elgar’nan’s flaming backside, you are going to be the death of me one of these days.” He stepped away from Solas and rubbed his hand down his face, assessing the damage.

“I wasn’t certain if it had enough energy, but there was more than I’d realised.” Solas looked around him, brows raised in mild surprise.

“You are fortunate I was able to help with the barrier. We would have been smears of ash on the ground otherwise.” Holy shit— That was a close call. “You should have waited for me to call reinforcements!”

“I doubt we would have had the time to wait. The Forgotten and their followers know not of mercy.” He looked at the orb with a new and grim understanding and tucked it back into his robes with a frown. “I apologise. That was thoughtless of me. I did not foresee that the focus would be so devastating.”

“Of course it would have more potency than you’d expect. Some people still worship you.”

His expression twisted. “Not through any choice of mine.”

“Do you think the Evanuris chose to be worshipped in the beginning?”

“That is not as comforting as you think it is.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. It was meant to be sobering.”

Solas made a soft sound and looked away. “Then mission accomplished.”

They walked away from the rubble of the temple, just to distance themselves from the charred bodies. The desert winds were biting and cold as it brushed against Lavellan's cheek and ruffled his hair. He swept his hair out of his face, mind racing to account for this new development.

“Those weren’t all of the cultists, right?” asked Lavellan.

“No. Only one was high-ranking and prominent enough.”

“This can still work,” he muttered, kicking up sand as he paced. “Play to your anger. The Forgotten want you to join because you’d be an asset, so I think they’d still be willing to account for your temperament. Just say the High Priest displeased you, and taunt them a little, ask if this is the best they could offer. This show of violence would also please the Forgotten since they value power and strength.”

“Do you ever rest?” Solas asked, sounding drained.

Lavellan stopped his pacing and frowned at Solas, appraising him. “Are you tired?” he asked.

“It has been a long night.”

Right. Solas was a soldier, not a spy. Missions of espionage would tire anyone who wasn’t trained for it, and the barrier to shield them from the focus' blast had depleted most of their mana.

“Alright,” Lavellan said. “We’ll go regroup and rest. Well, *you* can rest. I won’t be able to until I iron this out.”

Solas stared at him, his aura pulsing with mild surprise.

Lavellan scowled. “What, did you expect me to tell you that you’re not allowed to rest?”

“Yes.”

“I am not an unreasonable man, I know how draining missions like these can be. You shielded us from the blast on top of that.” Lavellan shifted into a giant raven and lowered himself. Solas frowned at him in question. “*Climb on my back,*” he said. “*I’ll fly us back to the nearest eluvian.*”

You can sleep in the meantime.”

The pulses of surprise in his aura became a steady roll. “I— That will not be necessary.”

“Pride, be wise. Either climb on my back or I grab you with my claws. That is going to be an uncomfortable ride.”

Solas hesitated, but he gave in and climbed on Lavellan’s back. Lavellan stood.

“Hold on,” Lavellan said and took flight.

Not even five minutes in and Solas was already asleep.

It was dawn by the time they reached Tarasyl’an. Lavellan landed on Solas’ balcony and kept Solas suspended using magic while Lavellan shifted back. He brought Solas in through the door, still keeping him afloat (because Lavellan had no delusions about his own stature and physical strength), and placed Solas in his bed.

Lavellan looked around the tidy room. A large tree made of intertwined crystal beside the balcony doors pulsed with a chromatic light, emanating a soft glow that kept the entire room warm. He looked up and let out an awed breath at the ceiling mural. It was a chart of the constellations, the connecting lines between the stars fading in and out every few seconds. A stylised eclipse reigned in the middle, the sun’s rays rotating as the moon pulsed with shadow.

Did Solas paint that? He didn’t know Solas was an artist.

He looked back at Solas’ sleeping form. Hot-headed, impulsive Solas was an artist? Lavellan couldn’t imagine it.

He stepped back out onto the balcony and looked up at Arlathan’s floating isles in the sky. Always the same distance away. He shifted back into a raven and flew down to the courtyard to access its eluvian. Eluvians were the only way to reach Arlathan after all.

He shifted back into an elf and placed his hand upon the eluvian. Solas hadn’t told Lavellan his pass, but no matter. Lavellan forced the eluvian open, murmured the pass for the El’amelan’s network, and the eluvian shimmered purple.

While most eluvians were only connected to their respective networks, Lavellan could enter the El’amelan’s network from any eluvian.

He stepped through. The El’amelan’s Crossroads was set at dusk, and an organised network of stone paths stretched across the realm, resting above the waters glimmering like liquid gold. If this Crossroads was entered from an eluvian not within this network, you would step out of the central eluvian located on a large, circular platform. Every available path in this realm converged towards this central platform. Entering the central eluvian again would lead to the El’amelan’s courtyard.

Lavellan navigated the network towards the eluvian in Dirthamen’s garden, passing the weeping willow trees growing in the middle of the waters, their curtain of leaves boasting the colours of autumn.

Once he reached the eluvian, he stepped into Dirthamen's garden. The wisterias Lavellan had planted along the path greeted him, arching overhead. He smiled at them, brushing his fingers along the flowers as he passed.

Dirthamen was usually here in the early hours of the morning, reading or having breakfast. Lavellan found him at the gazebo watching the sunrise.

“Good morning, ma Venuralas,” Lavellan greeted.

Dirthamen looked back at him and smiled, patting the railing beside him. “Will you come watch the sunrise with me?”

Lavellan smiled back and stood beside him. They watched the sunrise in silence, watched as the colours of the sky shifted through hues of peach and orange, then settled into its familiar blue.

“Thank you,” said Dirthamen after. “Now, I assume you’re here to tell me about last night?”

He sighed and recounted last night’s events. Dirthamen frowned.

“I told him we could play to his anger,” said Lavellan. “I also remember a few of the faces we saw last night. We could investigate their families or any connections that could lead back to other members of the cult.”

“We will have to be subtle. We cannot let the Forgotten know that Solas is working with us.” He paused, appraising Lavellan. “You have not slept.”

“I’m alright.”

“Take the rest of the day off.”

“But—”

Dirthamen gave him a look. Lavellan sighed and murmured his acquiescence.

“Good,” said Dirthamen.

“One more thing,” said Lavellan. “How did Solas craft a focus? You would need a fragment of a Titan’s heart, and the only place where a Titan’s heart is being kept is in one of the old tunnels. The entrance is only known by the Evanuris.”

Dirthamen’s face was impassive, but there was a glint in his eyes that Lavellan was far too acquainted with.

“You?” asked Lavellan incredulously.

“Me? That’s quite the bold assumption, Lavellan.”

“You have that look in your eye. The same look you had when you ate Andruil’s share of the lamb without her knowing or when you swapped Sylaise’s bottles of wine.”

“You knew about the wine?” Dirthamen asked, a touch surprised.

“Of course I knew about the wine.” Lavellan frowned. “Ma Venuralas, why did you help him craft a focus?”

“Why not? He is an Evanuris now, is he not? And yet the others will not let him have a seat at the

table.”

He rubbed his eyes. “I do not understand. Are you attempting to contain him, or are you striving for his fair treatment?”

“Both. They call him a god yet treat him like a child. He has valuable insight, yet he is mocked for them. When one remains ignored, they may resort to extreme measures to be heard. I know you see his tricks as a nuisance at worst, but I see them as a warning. They may escalate.”

“So your solution was to give him an instrument of great power?”

“It will hopefully serve as a physical reminder that his actions have consequences.” Dirthamen looked out at the sky. “You only feel the weight of a life...”

Lavellan sighed, but completed the saying.

“When the dagger is in your hand,” he finished with a murmur.

One afternoon, Lavellan wandered one of Arlathan’s marketplaces with Solas and Felassan in search of an undercover Forgotten worshipper. Solas had his hood up, enchanted to prevent others from recognising him.

Solas wasn’t as confrontational today. Maybe because Felassan was there to lighten the mood. That, or getting into an argument would attract unwanted attention.

Their search was fruitless, in the end.

“I suppose this lead was no good,” said Felassan. He shrugged. “Oh well. I saw a delightful little lamp a few stalls back that I want to buy. I’ll meet you two at the central eluvian. Or go on ahead without me. Either way.”

And off he went. Lavellan watched him go, already wishing for his return. It’d been nice not having a strained or awkward atmosphere between him and Solas.

They walked through the marketplace in silence. Lavellan pretended to be browsing while Solas looked straight ahead, gaze occasionally wandering over the glowing signs hovering above the stalls.

“Do you see anything you’d like to buy?” asked Solas. An attempt at small talk perhaps.

“Not really. I don’t buy very many things anyway.”

“Ah.”

Silence.

This physically hurt.

Lavellan busied himself with observing his surroundings again, looking over the faces of the people within the crowd and gathering inspiration for faces he could wear.

“If you drop these like last time, that’s five lashes.”

“Yes, Mirthadra.”

Lavellan glanced at the source of the voices. A noblewoman and her slave. The slave was trailing after his mistress while carrying a small crate on his shoulders and a tray of smoked nuts on his head. His arms were shaking. How long has he been carrying those?

The slave faltered on a step. The tray on his head tipped and the nuts rolled down the pile, threatening to spill.

Lavellan flicked his fingers and righted the tray with magic, then cast a quick spell on the items to ease their encumbrance. The slave blinked in surprise. He checked the contents of the crate and tray to ensure nothing had fallen out. His confusion grew.

They walked past Lavellan. The slave’s eyes met his. Lavellan cast a meaningful glance at the crates and trays and brushed his aura against the slave’s to reassure him. The slave’s expression fell in relief and he gave a grateful nod. Lavellan looked away and continued.

Solas was staring at him.

“What did you do?” Solas asked.

“A minor spell to help with the weight. Builders use it all the time.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“To... ease the weight? Building materials aren’t exactly light—”

“No. Why did you help him? What did that have to do with your mission?”

He shrugged. “Nothing. Must everything I do relate to my job?”

“You had struck me as that kind of man.”

Lavellan scoffed. “You do not even know me that well and yet you would already cast your judgement.”

“You have already cast yours as well.”

The silence this time was more icy than awkward.

Since it seemed neither of them were going to make any purchases, they walked back to the central eluvian.

Perhaps Lavellan *had* been quick with his assessment of Solas, but it was difficult to *want* to attempt to get to know him when he was so temperamental. Lavellan was just eager for this assignment to end.

“Move, move, move!” yelled somebody in the near distance.

Lavellan and Solas stopped and frowned at each other.

“Does that sound like Felassan to you?” asked Lavellan.

They looked back. It was indeed Felassan, trying to sprint through the crowd of people. Enraged

cries called after him. Felassan grabbed Solas and Lavellan and yanked them along before anybody could ask.

“Why are we running?” Lavellan asked, grimacing and apologising as he bumped into a few people.

Felassan grinned. “I threw a pie at someone.”

“What?” Solas bit out, grabbing the edge of his hood to keep it in place.

“Did I say someone? Make that sometwo. Somethree.”

“Why did you make us run with you?” Lavellan demanded, almost tripping over his own foot. “We had nothing to do with it! Now we’re implicated too!”

Felassan cackled in lieu of answering.

Chapter End Notes

Me now having to keep track of what's going on in Solas AND Dirthamen's heads:

(Some of you really looked at Dirthamen and went "Daddy" huh? Sharing one brain cell huh?)

I was wondering what Skyhold would've been called pre-Veil coz Tarasly'an Te'las means the place where the sky was held back. But no Veil yet. So I just removed the held back part. The place where the sky dwells seems fitting.

Anyway, Felassan is the extrovert who adopts the introverts and the introverts stick to him, and when he's gone, everything's awkward. Bless you Felassan.

Friends in high places

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 2218 FA |

Lavellan stepped out of the eluvian into Dirthamen's garden and followed the opalescent path to the gazebo, expecting to find Dirthamen there, but there was somebody else with him. Lavellan stopped.

Solas.

They were conversing softly, backs turned to him. Lavellan approached quietly.

"...rooted into their identity," he overheard Solas say. "Be gentle, be patient. Disassembling a belief can take longer than it did to assemble."

"I am only one voice," murmured Dirthamen. "Will that suffice?"

"One voice may hold more volume than the others."

Lavellan frowned. What were they talking about? He cleared his throat and they turned at the sound. He knelt and bowed.

"You called for me, ma Venuralas?"

"I did," said Dirthamen. "Rise."

Lavellan rose. He glanced at Solas and gave him a begrudging nod of acknowledgement. Solas nodded back.

Dirthamen smiled at him. "Good morning. Have you had breakfast?"

"I have. Have you?"

"Yes."

Lavellan nodded. "So what did you wish to discuss?"

"It is regarding your mission to investigate the Forgotten Ones and their cult. Mother and I have agreed that we will have to stop working together with Solas for now. We have discovered that the Forgotten have spies within our courts. Until we find them, we cannot reveal our hand. We need the Forgotten to still have some semblance of trust in Solas."

Lavellan glanced at Solas again. *But can the Evanuris trust Solas?*

"Would you like me to find the spies?" asked Lavellan.

"Mother says she will look into it herself, so we will leave it up to her."

So they would have to wait until the spy was found. Lavellan kept his expression blank and aura

hidden, but he couldn't deny the wave of relief that washed over him.

"For now," said Dirthamen, "we carry on with what we were doing before. If there are any new developments, I will let you know."

He bowed. "Vin, ma Venuralas."

Dirthamen dismissed him and Lavellan left feeling lighter. He shifted into a raven and flew, elated.

| Radahlen Estate, Elvhenan | 2220 FA |

Nobles chattered in the ballroom, celebrating Lord and Lady Radahlen's wedding. Lavellan posed as the doorman for the evening, showing others in as they came into the ballroom.

He wasn't fond of the Radahlens. They were more pretentious than most, and Lavellan had met quite the pretentious people in his lifetime. They also disliked Dirthamen's court. Lavellan wasn't certain if the dislike extended to Dirthamen himself, but either way, it was still an affront.

He'd already finished tonight's mission, at least. He just had to wait for the banquet to finish.

Faronel was lurking on the upper ledges of the high-ceilinged ballroom, cast in shadow. Lavellan had told him to go home earlier, but he'd refused and stayed.

Vergala called to him. *I saw Solas.*

He frowned. "*Where? Here?*"

Garden. But I can't find him again.

What was he doing—

Oh.

"No," he groaned to himself. No, please, no more tricks. He was tired and he was *not* feeling up to fixing whatever mess Solas would make this time.

Someone knocked at the door and Lavellan opened it with a sink in his stomach, but it was merely the servants wheeling in the covered statue that the Radahlens had commissioned. The guests quieted as it was brought in.

The sculptor walked with it. "Be gentle," he snapped at one of the servants pushing it in. "This is made of very delicate material. You scratch it, that's fifty lashes."

Lavellan closed the doors and eyed the size of it. That thing was as tall as five men. He resisted scoffing.

The sculptor bowed in front of the Radahlens' table. "My esteemed patrons, I have completed for you the gift that the generous Lord Radahlen wished to give his newly-wedded wife. It is a statue of Lord Radahlen himself! To go into the garden you have commissioned, my lady. So that you may always be able to gaze upon the object of your affections."

You can't be serious, he thought.

Should I shit on it? asked Vergala.

Lavellan snorted to himself.

“Behold!” said the sculptor and unveiled it.

A gasp swept through the crowd. Lavellan clapped his hand over his mouth, both in horror and to hold his laughter at bay.

The sculpture had been vandalised.

Lord Radahlen's likeness was posed pretentiously with an austere expression (that was clearly sculpted to look more appealing than the real man), but someone had drawn a pig's snout over the face. There were arrows pointing to the crotch with *'Aim here'* written in bold characters. His ass had been painted to look like actual targets and a whole slew of inflammatory and obscene words of insult covered the statue.

Lord Radahlen rose from his seat, face and aura a vivid red, expression contorting into a snarl. His wife stared at the statue, jaw slack. The guests whispered to each other and the sculptor let out a cry and staggered back, fetching for a seat.

“Who is responsible for this?” roared Lord Radahlen.

A slow clap echoed in the ballroom.

They all looked towards the source of the sound. There, on the ledge just above one of the doors, sat Solas.

“Fen'Harel!” gasped a guest.

Lavellan's brows raised. Solas never appeared during tricks. This was a first.

“It looks better this way, would you not agree?” asked Solas, smiling.

“You did this?” Radahlen demanded.

“I am somewhat of an artist myself, you see,” said Solas. “So I thought I would congratulate you on such a momentous occasion and offer you a gift of my own.”

“A *gift*?”

“I think it is a good likeness of you.”

Radahlen opened his mouth. A pig's snort echoed from the statue.

A few guests laughed.

Any time Radahlen attempted to say something, the statue would snort and overpower his words. Solas' smile widened. The laughter grew in volume. Radahlen's face turned an even more alarming shade of red.

“You forgot to invite your other side of the family, Radahlen,” said Solas. He swung a leg off the ledge and knocked his heel against the door below him.

The door opened.

And out came a flood of pigs, snorting and squealing and tracking mud in their wake. Everything devolved into chaos. The guests screamed and clambered on top of the tables as the pigs stampeded around them.

Lavellan was torn between laughing and weeping because of the *mess* he'd have to clean up.

Radahlen snarled at Solas. "You will pay for this."

Solas' smile faded, and he stood on the ledge, aura radiating danger. Lavellan frowned to himself. This didn't seem like Solas. It almost seemed...

Theatrical.

"Will I?" Solas asked and Radahlen took a step back, some of his fear bleeding into his aura. "If you are a pig, Radahlen, and I am a wolf... Remind me again what wolves do to pigs?"

The red drained from Radahlen's face.

Solas smiled again at his silence and tipped his head. Not even a proper bow. "Well, I shall let you return to your celebration. The cakes were lovely."

Radahlen roared and shot a blast of magic at Solas, but Solas vanished in a burst of flames. Lavellan rolled his eyes. A Fade-step that used flames as misdirection.

Lavellan stared at the pigs rampaging around the place and suppressed a sigh. He was going to have to wrangle them.

Radahlen sat back down, seething.

"Don't just stand there!" barked Lady Radahlen at the servants in the room. "Get those pigs!"

Lavellan was going to throw that damn wolf off a cliff. He rolled his sleeves up and conjured a rope of magic, reaching for the nearest pig.

His hand phased through it. He blinked.

What?

All the other servants cried out in confusion.

"They're illusions!"

The guests tentatively descended from the tables, jolting when a pig would phase through them. They may be illusions, but they were still obnoxiously *loud*.

What just happened?

Lavellan left the estate once he was dismissed. Rather than seethe at the servants, Radahlen just raved on about revenge on Fen'Harel. The pigs and the mud that had come with them had

disappeared after half an hour.

Faronel and Vergala joined Lavellan as they left through the back of the estate.

“What was that about?” asked Lavellan.

“One of Fen’Harel’s tricks that I have been hearing about, I presume,” said Faronel.

“He’s not in the habit of appearing during them though. He just leaves the mess behind.”

They spotted two figures conversing in the darkness by the borders of the estate. Faronel walked slightly in front, shielding Lavellan as they approached.

“—left behind. They should be alright,” said one of them.

Lavellan frowned. “Felassan?” he called.

The two figures looked over. One of them was indeed Felassan, and the other was hooded so Lavellan couldn’t make out their features. He tapped Faronel, who moved aside.

“Ras?” asked Felassan once they were near enough. He glanced at Vergala and Faronel, then beamed at the confirmation. “Ras!”

Lavellan stopped in front of them, and finally recognised the other hooded figure.

“The doorman,” said Solas in surprise.

“I’ve witnessed some of your tricks before,” said Lavellan, “but you’ve never made a public appearance during them. Why start?”

Solas seemed more like himself now. So his demeanour back then *had* been an act. Playing the part of Fen’Harel.

“So they would have a central figure to pin their outrage on,” said Solas. “They can seethe over Fen’Harel, the terrible god of tricks, rather than lash out at the slaves.” He crossed his arms and looked away. “The pigs were also an illusion. There was no true mess to rectify.”

Lavellan stared at him, stunned. Had he... listened to Lavellan?

“The statue?” asked Lavellan. “You wrote *aim here* near his crotch?”

Felassan laughed. “That one was me. One of Radahlen’s slaves suggested painting targets on his ass.”

“All of the messages written on the statue were from his slaves,” said Solas. “To give them a voice when they would otherwise have none.”

Lavellan stared at him for a long moment. “I... see. And the bride? You did ruin her wedding day, somewhat.”

“She is a different kind of terrible, but not as much as Radahlen. Ruining her wedding day was punishment enough.”

“Huh,” was all Lavellan could say.

Solas’ expression soured. “If another lecture is to come, save it. I am far too exhausted to weather

it.”

“No,” said Lavellan, still surprised. “No, it... It’s fine. It was funny and ruinous in equal measure and you were responsible with it. It... It’s good.”

“Oh.”

“Well, uh... Good night, I suppose. I’m also tired from tonight’s job.” He nodded at Solas awkwardly. “If you keep the repercussions for the servants in mind like this from now on, I promise not to lecture you.”

“Of course. Good night.”

“Right, yes. Good night.” Lavellan paused. “Thank you for listening.”

He walked past them and headed back home.

“Will you come see a play with me?” Solas asked.

“What do you wear to a play?” asked Lavellan.

Dirthamen looked up from his book. He was at the El’amelan’s garden today, escaping Sylaise. Something about wanting to take him to her vineyard. They were currently resting in the sitting area within the gazebo that Vedir had decorated. Potted plants hung from the ceiling along with strings of light.

“Solas invited me to see Lathanir’s play,” Lavellan explained.

Dirthamen chuckled. “He *would* choose her.” He closed the book and leaned forward in his seat. “You’ve accompanied me to plays before. You know what to wear.”

“I accompanied you as your guard. I either came as a raven or in uniform.”

He hummed. “A nice robe will do.” He paused. “Where are you sitting?”

“I’m not certain.”

Dirthamen paused. “Make sure your attire is fire-resistant. Just as a precaution.”

“I’m sorry?” asked Lavellan.

“I think you will enjoy it.” He leaned back and looked up at the potted plants. “I am glad you and Solas are giving one another a chance.”

“The atmosphere between us is awkward and uncomfortable, if not outright hostile. I don’t know if I can manage the night.”

“The trick is to get Solas talking about philosophy.”

“Philosophy invites argument.”

He rested his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. “They call that a debate.”

Lavellan snorted and smiled.

“Besides,” said Dirthamen, “you will spend most of the time watching the play. Minimal talking required.”

“True...” He sighed. “Alright, I suppose I’ll see how it goes.”

“The *entire* stage,” Lavellan exclaimed. “The whole thing, just—” He laughed. “I know it was an illusion, but it had still been a shock, regardless.”

Solas chuckled. “It connects to the central message.”

It was night already, and they were wandering a deserted park as they talked about the play they had just finished watching. They spoke of themes, their applications to real life, then moved on to the merit of breaking away from tradition, the balance between novelty and respect.

The night wore on, until it was time to say their farewells. They stopped in front of an eluvian.

“Thank you for tonight,” said Lavellan.

“I hope you enjoyed it.”

“I did.” He smiled. “And the subsequent talk after. I tend to not discuss philosophy with very many people besides Dirthamen. Most do more talking than listening. If I do talk philosophy, it’s often with spirits.”

Solas smiled back. “I agree. Spirits are pure, untainted by the material things, content to wander the labyrinth of unanswerable questions.”

“This is so much better than yelling at each other,” said Lavellan. “I mean no offence. You are tiring.”

“As are you.”

Lavellan chuckled and Solas smiled.

His friendship with Solas didn’t fall apart as he’d expected it to. Their interactions remained infrequent since they were too busy with their own tasks, but sometimes, Lavellan would run into Solas during jobs. And sometimes, Lavellan would help him with his tricks.

Solas asked him to see another of Lathanir's play five years later, and of course, Lavellan went.

The next play was another five years later. And the next was seven years later. Lavellan decided to invite Solas first, that time.

And so, the decades turned. He and Solas would talk after they'd run into each other on jobs, and Lavellan would give feedback on how Solas' latest round of mischief had gone, and whether it had done more harm than good.

In return, if Solas stumbled across any clues that could help Lavellan's current job, he would inform him.

It was a good system.

Dirthamen smiled when Lavellan referred to Solas as his friend.

Meanwhile, Dirthamen grew more and more weary as time passed.

Lavellan entered his room one evening and found him at his desk, one hand gripping his head and the other writing. The scowl he was wearing could make children cry in fear.

He needed a break.

Lavellan placed a hand on Dirthamen's shoulder and rested the other over the wrist of his writing hand. Dirthamen stopped writing.

"Will you fly with me?" asked Lavellan.

His scowl dissolved. "I have to finish these."

"They will not grow legs and leave the desk. Come, fly to the coast with me. I saw a secluded beach while flying the other day."

Dirthamen lifted his head and gave him a small smile. "The beach? It is already night."

He shot Dirthamen a cheeky grin. "Afraid of the dark, ma Venuralas?"

"You are terrible," he said, but he was already standing. "Let me get changed into trousers first. These robes don't do much for practicality."

Lavellan's grin widened.

They shifted into ravens and flew to the beach Lavellan had found up north, then shifted back upon arrival. The waves crashed against the rocks and shore, the water's foam gleaming like the edge of a blade beneath the light of the second moon. There was no sign of the first moon. Still a new moon.

"There's nobody to order you to take a break," said Lavellan as they walked along the shore, feeling soft sand between his toes, "so I suppose I'll have to physically drag you out myself."

Dirthamen examined an iridescent shell he'd picked up earlier. "I am taller and heavier than you. I

wish you luck with the physical aspect.”

“Ma Venuralas,” he griped, “that is cruel.”

“Simply a fact.” He smiled in teasing. “I could pick you up myself.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.” He held up a finger. “But have you considered that I am much faster? You would have to catch me first.”

“My reach is longer.”

“I’ll be out of your reach, long or not.”

“I am also fast.”

“You?” Lavellan grinned. “I’m not certain. It seemed as if you were flying a little slow.”

Dirthamen sighed, but there was a faint smile pulling at his lips.

Lavellan walked to the edge of the beach, just beyond the water’s reach. He looked back at Dirthamen. “But really, you insist on the importance of taking breaks. That applies to you, too.”

“I know,” he murmured and tucked his hair behind his ear as a breeze dislodged it. “But it is difficult to rest and let my guard down. My domain does not allow it. Being the master of secrets invites the malicious, the curious, or both.”

“Which is why I’m here.” He looked back out at the dark expanse of the ocean. “I will carry what I can to ease some of your burdens.”

“You already carry far too much. You have gone beyond the normal duties of a spymaster.”

A passing cloud obscured the moon and stifled its light.

“The tallest towers fall the hardest,” said Lavellan. A large wave crashed against the shore and the water managed to reach his feet. Cold. “You are trying to keep your balance on top of carrying the weight of the empire. I will ease your burdens. I will be the blade that slays the danger, the shield that protects, and the poison in your enemies’ cups.”

The cloud that had obscured the moon lifted and silver moonlight fell over them once more.

He faced Dirthamen fully and put his hand to his chest.

“I will not let you fall,” Lavellan declared fiercely. “Just as you have promised to not let me fall.”

Dirthamen’s eyes widened, but the brief look of shock faded into something wry. “How easily you say such things. But you are like a blade without a hilt. If I hold you wrong, you will cut me. What are the conditions of your unwavering loyalty?”

Lavellan’s hand fell back to his side and he tilted his head in thought. “Had you asked me this when I had just begun serving you, I would have said that I would ruin you if you misuse me.”

“And now?”

“I have faith in you. I know I am not the easiest and safest weapon to wield, but if I ever cut you, I will mend the wound myself. There are no conditions. My loyalty is yours.”

Dirthamen frowned. “How come?”

How come? Such a silly question with such a simple answer.

“I like you,” said Lavellan. “Simple as that. You have attracted my attention, and you have kept it for a reason.” He shrugged, smiling. “I enjoy being around you.”

His frown gave way to something tentative. “Then, would you say you consider me a... friend?”

“I—” He paused. “Is that alright?”

Dirthamen just stared at Lavellan, didn’t respond for a long time.

“If it isn’t,” started Lavellan—

“No, that...” Dirthamen’s smile returned, eyes squinting slightly. “That is fine. That... I am happy that you consider me a friend.”

Lavellan looked down, chewing on his lip. “That may be too brazen of me.”

“No, far from it,” said Dirthamen, and joined Lavellan at the edge of the shore.

Lavellan smiled to himself, couldn’t explain the feeling in his chest.

For a while, they said nothing, staring out at the uncertain darkness that obscured the line where sky met sea.

“Lavellan?” Dirthamen asked softly. Lavellan almost missed it because of the roaring waves and howling wind. He glanced at Dirthamen in question. “Can I trouble you for a request?”

“It’s never a trouble if it’s you.”

He huffed out a gentle laugh. “How easily you say such things,” he murmured again, and looked down at the shell in his hand, rubbing this thumb over its ridges. “When it is just us, will you call me by my name?”

“I— Oh.” Call him by his name? “I wouldn’t want to presume...”

“Is it presumption if I ask?”

Lavellan had said his name before, but always with a title. This felt different. More personal. It felt as if some barrier between them was thinning, that a line that had been drawn in the sand was fading with every breath of wind.

He wasn’t certain what would happen if that line and barrier were to fade.

“Dirthamen,” Lavellan murmured, as if it were a secret from the very depths of his heart.

Dirthamen smiled at him again, the weariness in his eyes lifting.

Chapter End Notes

(Friends in high places is the chapter title and-- And not only are Solas and Dirthamen gods. They're also. Literally in high places. Solas lives on a mountain, Dirthamen is on a floating isle-- Please laugh)

Man, present day Lavellan telling Sera the shit Solas once got up to would be a hilarious conversation.

Beating with a red, red heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 2389 FA |

The Forgotten case was back on. It took a while since the spies they'd find would kill themselves, but Mythal was able to stop one from doing so this time, and Dirthamen was called to interrogate them.

Lavellan paced the study they were in as they waited for Dirthamen and Mythal to return. Solas was looking out of the window, frowning at the spires of the palace.

“The tiles will beg for your mercy soon if you pace any faster,” said Solas.

“I’m polishing them,” he muttered.

Solas snorted.

The door opened and Lavellan stopped pacing.

Mythal and Dirthamen entered, their faces grim. Beside each other, Lavellan could see the similarities between them — the slim yet defined set of their jaws, the shape of their eyes, and their general disposition. Dirthamen was closer to Elgar’nan in stature, but he moved like Mythal.

Lavellan bowed in greeting but he didn’t kneel.

Mythal said nothing of it, a ghost of a smile flitting over her lips.

“The Forgotten are scheming,” said Dirthamen, settling down on one of the seats and crossing his arms in thought.

“Are they not always?” asked Solas, coming over to sit across him. Mythal remained at the desk. Lavellan just stood in place and clasped his hands behind his back. “What about?”

“Our downfall,” said Mythal. “They wish to rock the very foundations of the empire and watch as it all crumbles to ruin. The question that remains is what instrument they will use.”

The three discussed the situation but Lavellan stayed quiet, intimidated from being in the same space as three gods. It was different when he was alone with Dirthamen or Solas. For the most part, he didn’t even see Solas as a god, and Lavellan had been with Dirthamen for so many centuries that he felt comfortable with him. Mythal, however...

She radiated authority. And this encompassing authority had the ability to grip everybody in the room, influencing them to step up to their role, or remain quiet. Once she walks in, it would become evident who was holding power in the room.

What was Lavellan even doing here? Mythal had summoned him, too.

During a lull in their conversation, Mythal looked right at him, golden eyes piercing.

“You are perhaps wondering why I have summoned you,” said Mythal.

Lavellan nodded. “I thought it was because I am a spymaster, but you have spymasters of your own. Does it involve the El’ras’amelan?”

She smiled, tilting her head. “You are not just a spymaster. You are my son’s confidante outside of the family, and you are unerringly loyal to him.” Her eyes flashed. “Are you?”

He straightened and frowned. “There is no question.”

“If he tells you to plunge your dagger into your heart?”

Dirthamen scowled at her. “Mother—”

Lavellan unsheathed his dagger and held the point over his heart, maintaining eye contact with Mythal. “Then he need only say the word.”

A silence settled over the room. Mythal’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“Ras,” said Dirthamen, clipped, “sheathe your weapon.”

Lavellan returned his dagger.

“You are fortunate, Dirthamen,” said Mythal, “that you have caught the attention of such a wilful man. An intriguing paradox, that a spirit whose nature involves constant evolution would be the most headstrong. But I suppose the most turbulent of forces require a stable core. How stable is your core, Isha’belsal’in? What will shake it? And what will you shake with it if it does?”

He disliked Mythal’s scrutiny. It was as if a thousand needles were slipping into the smallest openings of his skin.

“Stable enough for me to avoid losing myself,” said Lavellan. “I suppose that counts for something. It helps that the one I serve understands my nature and has catered to and nurtured it.”

Her gaze sharpened.

Lavellan avoided looking at Solas.

“Returning to the issue,” said Dirthamen, “why *have* you summoned us?”

Mythal glanced at Dirthamen and Lavellan released the tension that had built on his shoulders.

“I want the three of you to work with one another,” said Mythal. “This operation is delicate, and I wish to keep it within this room lest we cause unnecessary panic. Dirthamen, this will require you to return to the field.”

Lavellan’s brows raised. Dirthamen? Actively doing espionage? It had been a long time since he’d done so.

Dirthamen hesitated, then nodded.

“I am aware you have been away from the field for a long time,” said Mythal, “but the Ras’virelan traverses it daily. He will be your guide. Solas is—”

“Bait,” Solas finished.

Mythal chuckled. "If that is what you wish to call it."

"The Guide, the Bait, and the Uncertain," Dirthamen said wryly. "What a merry team we make."

Lavellan wasn't certain how he fit into the team, and he wasn't sure how to act now. He'd settled on professional, but both Dirthamen and Solas seemed peeved by his sudden distant behaviour so he dropped the act.

He wasn't certain what he was contributing to the team either. Mythal had said he would be the guide, but he was sure Dirthamen and Solas could have managed on their own.

No, that didn't matter. If he didn't know what he was contributing, then he better find something to contribute. This was an important job, and he needed to give his all. The Forgotten were a threat to the empire and the People, and maybe Lavellan was trying to keep a sinking ship afloat, but he wasn't going to let the rest suffer for the transgressions of a few.

Months of running around Elvhenan and collating information led them to rumours of a new kind of lyrium that was circulating around the empire. The rumours said this kind was red rather than blue, that it could induce madness in those who'd been exposed to it, it would sing a haunted song, that it was more potent than regular lyrium.

The three of them examined the information they'd laid out over Solas' war table. It wasn't as cold in Tarasyl'an today.

"Red lyrium," said Dirthamen. "I've never heard of or seen such a thing."

"Do you think this is what the Forgotten are planning to use?" asked Lavellan.

"Possibly," said Solas. "If the rumours contain even the smallest grain of truth."

Dirthamen leaned over the table. "True or not, it bears investigating." He tapped the circled area on the map. "Tell me about this, Ras."

"It's a mining facility where they source the red lyrium," said Lavellan. "I suspect it may lead into the Earth's tunnels."

Solas put his hand to his chin in thought, contemplative.

"What is it, Solas?" Dirthamen asked.

"I was wondering... How did the Earth react to the poison during the war?"

"The earthquakes stopped, for one," said Dirthamen. "And the Children of the Stone lost their coordination. We felt the Titans' presences fade."

"But did they disappear? Or did their presences simply weaken to the point that you could no

longer sense them?”

“We found the heart of a dead Titan.” The heart that they used to create their foci. “I suppose we’d assumed that the rest had suffered a similar fate.”

Solas clasped his hands behind his back and looked out of the window, silent for a moment.

“It was said,” Solas started, “that a student of Syl’isenir had laboured over a body of work for fifty days and fifty nights. An assemblage of unparalleled size and complexity. However, the work had taken its toll. On the final night, due to her fatigue, she forgot a vital piece that would have stabilised the entire structure. When the assemblage was presented, it hit the corner of a table as it was being wheeled in.” He looked back at them. “The assemblage fell apart and killed Syl’isenir’s student as the entirety of its weight fell upon her.”

Dirthamen and Lavellan stared at him. How... grim. But why did that sound familiar?

“Wait, I know that story,” said Lavellan. “From Athan’seth’s anthology.”

Solas smiled and nodded.

Dirthamen gave them both an unimpressed look. “That anthology is banned.”

“Really?” asked Lavellan. This was the first time he was hearing about this. “I just thought it was alright since I found it in one of your shelves. I think it was your copy that I’d read.”

Dirthamen fell quiet. A small snort of laughter escaped Solas, but he turned away and cleared his throat to disguise it.

“Oh,” said Lavellan. “Oh! My apologies— I saw nothing.”

Solas did laugh then.

Dirthamen pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do not tell my father,” he muttered. “He hates that anthology.”

“I did not know Elgar’nan could read,” said Solas.

Lavellan burst out laughing and immediately clamped his hand over his mouth.

“Have pity, Solas,” said Dirthamen, smiling faintly. “My father’s sight has gone with age. Foresight and hindsight included.”

Lavellan turned away, shoulders shaking from his held back laughter. He recomposed himself.

“Back to the matter,” said Lavellan. “Solas, you were saying?”

Solas’ lips twitched, but he continued. “Everyone was weary from the war and desired swift victory. The most meticulous of works can still be ruined within the final minute, no matter the skill of the artist. You rush to conclude when you are tired, or when you are emotionally charged.”

Lavellan recalled the Guile demon. He straightened unconsciously and Dirthamen’s gaze flitted towards him.

“I am saying,” said Solas, “that perhaps only a few of the Titans have died, and that the rest are ill or dormant. But nobody sensed such a weak presence because they’d wanted to believe it was over.”

“It is a possibility,” said Dirthamen. “One which makes me uneasy. How does this connect to the red lyrium?”

“If lyrium is the blood of a Titan, could red lyrium be a result of the poison you have used? And if so, where else could it have spread besides the blood?”

What helped circulate the blood?

“Its heart,” murmured Lavellan, frowning.

A tense silence settled over them.

Dirthamen stared down at the map. “Shall we go investigate this source, then?”

The small, mining facility had been set up at the foot of a mountain with minimal guards. They infiltrated at nightfall.

The mining complex had equipment for lyrium mining, but they couldn’t see a single scrap of actual lyrium.

“The vein may have dried,” murmured Dirthamen.

“It could explain why there are so few guards and personnel,” said Lavellan. “It also looks like they’re preparing to leave.”

After a handful of minutes of navigating their way through the mining complex, they reached the entrance to one of the Earth’s tunnels and entered.

Lavellan had never been in one of the Earth’s tunnels before. They were wide, spacious, rivalling the main corridors in the palace. The architecture melded with the surrounding stone, uniform yet intricate — an impressive feat for a race without magic. But the tunnels were deserted. The miners hadn’t gone this deep.

They soon reached a large chasm, a network of stone bridges crossing the hollow space. The unknown writing carved into the walls of the bridge glowed blue and lit the way.

Where to, now?

A soft song filled his ears. Faint. He’d mistaken it for the ringing you’d hear in the silence, but no... it was...

“Do you hear that?” Lavellan whispered.

They stayed quiet, listening.

Dirthamen frowned. “We’ll follow it. Everyone, stay close.”

“We may encounter the Children of the Stone,” said Lavellan.

Solas glanced around him. “I am unsure about that. The area seems... deserted.”

They made their way through with care. The drop below was so steep that Lavellan could only see a sea of darkness.

Not once did they encounter a Child of Stone. How strange.

He was unsure how long they spent traversing the bridges, how deep into the mountain they'd gone, but they eventually entered another closed tunnel. The song grew piercing. Lavellan winced. It was still soft and faint, but now there was a sharpness to it. A disjointed progression.

When they turned the corner, they stopped.

Jagged clusters of red crystals had erupted along the walls, pulsing with light.

No, not crystals.

Red lyrium.

"It's real," Lavellan said, eyes wide.

"Don't touch it," said Dirthamen.

They stayed close as they progressed deeper, ignoring the song in their heads. The tunnels soon exited out into a colossal cavern, its sheer size comparable to a city. Despite the underground conditions, it was still verdant, rife with flora. There were structures and bridges built around the huge stalactites.

But red lyrium had infested the place. The cavern was just as red as it was green with trees.

"Holy shit," Lavellan murmured.

And at the centre of the cavern, housed within an impressive and open edifice, was a red, jagged, irregular structure.

The Titan's heart.

The song screeched in their head.

Lavellan pushed Dirthamen and Solas back and away from the cavern. "We have to get out," he said. "Now!"

The Evanuris sent out people to find more of these... Blighted Titans.

And sealed the entrances to their tunnels.

They returned to Arlathan and reconvened with Mythal.

"We still do not know what the Forgotten are planning," said Dirthamen, "but I am uncertain if our

other discovery was better or worse.”

“It was a threat in the making,” said Mythal. “The poison’s nature may have been altered by the Titan. We cannot risk exposing anyone else to it.”

They were back in the study where Mythal had first told them to work together, but this time Lavellan was sandwiched between Dirthamen and Solas on the couch. Mythal was on the seat across them, collected. These three had too much of a presence together. Lavellan wanted to shrink into the seat but he kept himself composed.

“Will the seals hold?” asked Solas.

“In the meantime,” she said. “We will send people to strengthen them periodically.”

“What do you plan for the Forgotten’s ploy?”

She drummed her fingers on the table’s edge. “Dirthamen has been away from court for almost a year. His presence is required.” She looked at Dirthamen. “Andruil has asked if she can take over the mission. She says she has a plan.”

Dirthamen tilted his head. “What plan?”

“She has not said.”

“Ma Venuralas,” Lavellan spoke up and they looked at him. He’d gotten used to Dirthamen and Solas being present together, but again, Mythal’s presence was prominent and heavy, and it was shifting the dynamics within the room. He could not see Solas and Dirthamen as his friends. All he could see were the gods.

“Yes?” asked Mythal.

He swallowed. “Lord Dirthamen may be required back at court, but I can still continue on with the case.”

“Likewise,” said Solas.

Mythal hummed. “What do you think, Dirthamen?”

Dirthamen crossed his arms and frowned in thought. “I will have to talk to Andruil, determine what she’s planning. I’ll decide from there. For now, we will put it on hold.”

She nodded. “That will do.” She swept her gaze over all three of them. “Well done. The result may not have been what we were seeking to accomplish, but you have still collected valuable information that will help us. Your efforts are to be commended.” She stood, her crown glinting from the sunlight streaming in through the window. “Rest well.”

And off she went.

Once the door closed, Lavellan felt himself relaxing more.

“Why am I in the middle of both of you?” asked Lavellan.

“Feeling small?” teased Solas.

“He *is* small, Solas. Have mercy,” said Dirthamen.

Lavellan grunted and stood, righting his cloak.

Dirthamen chuckled and stood as well. “Well, I suppose this concludes our collaboration. It was... nice to return to the field after so long. And enlightening.” Something troubled crossed his expression, but it vanished quickly. Had Lavellan imagined it? Dirthamen looked at him and Solas with a small smile. “I am almost hesitant to return to court.”

“If you ever require a break,” said Solas, “I will not turn away any assistance with my *tasks*.”

“I am supposed to be discouraging you,” said Dirthamen, unimpressed. “Not joining you.”

“So you say,” said Lavellan. “But weren’t you the one who thought of that prank with the water?”

“It was a *stratagem*,” he defended. “Not a prank.”

Lavellan and Solas shared a look, their auras similar to one another, as if saying, *Can you believe this man?*

“Nevertheless,” said Solas with a smile, “keep it in mind. If you ever find yourself vexed by a particular noble...”

“You are a terrible influence.” Dirthamen waved his hand dismissively and turned away, but Lavellan caught the corners of his lips curling up. Fondness bloomed in his chest. He was going to miss this, too. They would all be too busy again, caught up in their own duties.

The three of them left the study together, but they soon had to go their separate ways.

Dirthamen prepared to head towards Andruil’s wing. Lavellan bowed his head in farewell and Dirthamen placed his hand on Lavellan’s shoulder.

“Thank you for your hard work,” said Dirthamen, smiling. “I know you were uncertain of your role in the beginning, but you have helped more than you know.”

Dirthamen's eyes were warm. Had they always looked that warm? There was always a sharpness to them, to his disposition in general. A sharpness reminiscent of Mythal’s. But...

“It was my pleasure,” said Lavellan.

Dirthamen took his hand away, still smiling, and nodded at Solas. Lavellan’s shoulder felt warm.

Lavellan turned and headed for the eluvian with Solas, frowning to himself.

“You seem troubled,” said Solas.

He blinked. “No, I...”

They passed a group of servants, who paled at the sight of them. The servants kept their head down as they passed, and the fearful tremor of their auras brushed against Lavellan.

Solas sighed to himself.

“Don’t feel too bad,” said Lavellan. “I think it was the combination of our presence.”

“Do you like being feared?”

“It’s not a matter of liking it or not. It’s necessary. To protect Dirthamen, the El’amelan, and my

identity.”

“In that order?”

“Yes.”

Solas was quiet for a while. They took a shortcut through a small garden.

“You are more caring than I have given you credit for,” said Solas. “I have been meaning to apologise for the things I’d said when we first met. I am sorry. You are neither heartless nor callous.”

Lavellan said nothing, uncertain about how to take the apology.

“But as I’ve said earlier,” Solas continued, “you seem troubled. If you are worried about the Forgotten Ones, I am certain Dirthamen and Mythal will find a suitable approach.”

Yes, that *was* what Lavellan should be worried about, wasn’t it?

“Strangely, it isn’t that,” said Lavellan. “It’s just... Dirthamen seems different.”

“Different?”

“I—” He grumbled and used his aura to convey it instead. Words were a little beyond him for now, and he wasn’t certain how to articulate it in the first place.

Solas paused, then chuckled. “Have you considered that perhaps it is because he feels comfortable and safe enough to let his guard down around you?”

“Oh,” he murmured, an unnamed emotion in his chest.

“Is that surprising?”

“Yes? No?” He rubbed his face. “I don’t know. I *have* been with him for a long time, and I suppose I consider him a friend. It just— But it’s just me.”

Solas stopped walking. Lavellan stopped as well and looked back at him in question. He was frowning.

“Ras, do you not think he considers you a friend in return?”

Lavellan blinked. “Why would he? I am simply his spymaster.”

“You can be both spymaster and friend. Surely you can see that he is fond of you.”

“Well sure, you can be fond of your weapon or a beloved belonging. But you wouldn’t befriend it.”

Solas’ face fell. “Ras, you are a person.”

Lavellan scowled. “And a weapon. I take pride in that. I am useful to him, to the empire, to the People.”

“Enough with the—” He sighed and cut himself off before his voice could rise. He shook his head. “Your worth is not measured by your usefulness.”

“How else would you measure worth?”

“You do not!” he burst. “Self-worth is as quantifiable as time. It is an abstract concept, given a false construct to be better understood. But it exists with or without this false unit of measurement.”

Lavellan put his mask back on and pulled his hood over his head. “I’m tired. I’m going back to rest. Have a safe trip.”

“Ras—”

He shifted into a raven and flew away.

Dirthamen gave the Forgotten case to Andruil. He’d wanted Solas and Lavellan to handle it, but Andruil had annoyed him into giving it to her.

And so, the case was passed on.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 2399 FA |

It took a decade for Andruil to make her preparations for her plan. Lavellan couldn’t fathom why the preparation would take so long, until he found out what it was.

Andruil’s plan was to enter the Void.

She would go into the Void and back, her visits lasting decades, and she’d be gone longer and longer each time. Every return, her madness would last longer. Sometimes, she would rave about ancient, forgotten magic.

The Evanuris prohibited her from returning to the Void.

She snuck away.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 2538 FA |

With her recent return, she came back wearing the darkness of the Void.

She came back with the poison in her blood.

The elves on Andruil's lands were falling ill from an unknown sickness. At least, that was the story circulating about.

Dirthamen sat at his desk, fingers interlocked over the table. He and Lavellan stayed quiet.

"It's the poison," murmured Lavellan, "isn't it?"

"The quantity is small and Andruil is powerful enough to resist it, but for those who aren't gods... There is no cure."

The silence became heavy.

"We've isolated those who have fallen ill," Dirthamen continued. "Many are angered at Andruil."

"Shift the blame onto the Forgotten," said Lavellan, looking out of Dirthamen's large window to watch the clouds pass.

Dirthamen nodded. "The Forgotten want us to descend into chaos. This was... an experiment. They wish to see how we respond, so that they may exploit it for the real event."

Lavellan looked back at him. "Is that what their plan is? To unleash the magic that poisoned the Titans?"

"Some of the Forgotten were generals of the war, too. It would make sense for them to know of the poison and how to recreate it using magic from the Void. It was difficult to create since Void magic is troublesome to manipulate, but they have made the Void their home. They have adapted, and now use the Void over the Fade as the source of their magic."

"What now?"

Dirthamen sighed and rested his head on his hand. "Recovery, I suppose. And we need to find something to defend ourselves with before they master this new poison." He paused. "Or find something to counterattack with. At least Andruil also damaged the Forgotten while she was in the Void. One good thing."

The most affected were those in poverty, and the slaves.

Lavellan could only watch from the boundary of the isolated areas, stomach churning.

Mythal fought Andruil for three days and three nights, and emerged victorious, stealing Andruil's memories of how to reach the Void.

The propaganda also succeeded, and the People's anger transferred to the Forgotten Ones.

And Elvhenan knew peace once more.

Those who hadn't perished, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Hear my and Solas' heart breaking when Lavellan said you could be fond of a weapon but you wouldn't befriend it. It's a good thing Lavellan doesn't remember how to shapeshift because imagine all the arguments he'd have just flown away from.

(Lavellan please stop throwing shade at Mythal you're going to give Dirthamen grey hairs)

Anyway, look at the happier (ish) days when the trio still got along and all this betrayal and memory loss nonsense didn't exist yet! Yeah, go read banned books together, funky boys.

To be a person

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

| *Western desert, Elvhenan* | 2588 FA |

“Lord Elgar’nan wants it done by this afternoon.”

Lavellan perched on a scaffolding as a raven, situated himself near the messenger and director of construction.

The director of construction grunted. “My arm’s going to get sore from all the lashings I need to dole out. Why do I get all the lazy shits?”

Lavellan looked at the line of slaves pulling heavy blocks through the sand, the shackles on their wrists and ankles no doubt overheating due to the desert sun.

They were not lazy; they were exhausted.

The director of construction looked up and saw him. “Hey!” He threw a rock. “Scram!”

Lavellan flew off.

Come nightfall, he followed the director of construction as he retreated to his temporary shelter. Lavellan perched on the rafters and stared.

The director looked up and started. “Hey! How did you—” He grabbed his whip and snapped it near Lavellan, but Lavellan shifted back into an elf and grabbed the whip just as it was retreating. He floated down onto the ground, raven cloak fluttering behind him. His shadows curled and coiled around his ankles like live snakes.

The director’s face paled.

“You know who I am?” Lavellan asked, cold.

“Isha’belsal’in,” the director whispered.

Lavellan stared at the whip in his hand, the very whip that had bitten into the skin of mana-drained slaves under the scorch of a desert sun.

“You’re... You were just a myth,” said the director, voice trembling.

Lavellan’s gaze snapped towards him, let his shadows bleed into his aura and pressed it into the director, forcing him to his knees.

“Your arm,” said Lavellan. “Is it sore?”

The director dropped his whip and raised his hands up in a bid to shield himself. “I— Yes, yes, it —”

“Sore from lashings, you said?”

“My— My wards— They’re slow. Lord Elgar’nan wanted the entire upper levels of his desert temple finished by this afternoon. They required a steady delivery of lashings to keep them going.”

Lavellan watched him for a long moment, something in him burning. He took a step forward and pressed his aura into the director even further. The director let out a choked sound and retched.

“Do you have family?” Lavellan asked, ignoring his heaving.

“I—” He coughed. “No.”

“Lover?”

“N— No.” He cast Lavellan a pleading look. “Please, what do you want?”

“I want something very simple,” said Lavellan. “You could give it with no effort on your end.”

“Please, please, anything. Just leave me alone after, please.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t see me again after this.” He stretched his hand towards the director, gentle, almost as if he were pressing his fingers against glass. His hand glowed gold.

Lavellan closed his hand and paralysed the director’s heart.

“Father is furious,” said Dirthamen. “His director of construction died of a heart complication. A spell gone wrong, they said. It was meant to calm the heart, used for relaxation techniques.”

“I heard,” said Lavellan, flipping through one of Dirthamen’s books, sitting on his loft’s railing. “Although, and I mean this with great respect, the All-Father’s ire is hard to miss.”

Dirthamen looked up at Lavellan, gaze steady. “Do you think I do not recognise this trick? You had mentioned in passing centuries ago that you were looking into spells that could be disguised as accidents.”

Lavellan paused. Centuries ago? He remembered their conversations that far back?

“What have you done?” asked Dirthamen.

Lavellan closed his book with trembling hands. He couldn’t lie, not to Dirthamen. He didn’t want to lie to him of all people.

“I let my anger get the best of me,” said Lavellan.

“Why?”

He stared at the book cover, couldn’t bear to look at him. “Lord Elgar’nan wanted his temple finished by the afternoon. The director of construction treated his wards severely to meet this deadline. Some died from dehydration, some from the extensive injuries of the lashings, and yet he’d dared to call them lazy.”

That director deserved a far more gruesome death than what Lavellan had given.

"I wonder," said Dirthamen, "if the one you are angry at is the director or my father."

"Ma Ven—"

"Are you," he interrupted, voice sharp, "angry at my father, Lavellan?"

Lavellan paused. Was he? Just considering the thought felt...

"Please don't ask me that," Lavellan whispered, but Dirthamen still heard it.

Dirthamen looked out his window. He was going to have to report Lavellan. That was fine. This was the result of Lavellan's short-sightedness. He'd have to make sure that this wouldn't reflect poorly on Dirthamen—

"A shame," said Dirthamen, "that the director passed away from a tragic accident."

Lavellan stared at his back, eyes widening. "Dirthamen..."

"Pick your battles carefully. I know that you are very clever, but my reach cannot rival my father's."

Lavellan kept staring. Why? Why was he doing this? He'd always cover for him and his blunders, never punishing him when he stepped out of line.

"Why are you covering for me?" Lavellan asked. "Why do you keep letting me voice out things that would see anyone else flogged to death?"

"Why?" Dirthamen faced him again, frowning but not quite. "Because I care about you."

Lavellan's thoughts halted and his words failed him, but he shook himself out of it. Right. He was one of Dirthamen's best. If he was implicated, what would happen to the El'amelan? What would happen to the tasks that only Lavellan could do?

"I apologise," said Lavellan. "I was not thinking about the implications of my actions. You cannot afford to lose your spymaster."

Dirthamen let out a sharp breath. "You are not just my spymaster, Lavellan. You are also my friend."

"I—" Something caught in his throat. "That's—"

Dirthamen's expression softened. "Will you please come down here?"

Lavellan let the book fly back to its shelf and jumped down, softened his landing, and approached Dirthamen, keeping his gaze averted. His heart was beating in his ears.

He realised he'd been chewing on his lip and stopped.

Dirthamen sighed. "You said you considered me a friend."

"I do," he mumbled.

"Why did you think I did not consider you one in return?"

He had to have heard that from Solas. Lavellan was going to skin that wolf. "You don't befriend your weapons."

Dirthamen said nothing. Something agitated rolled beneath Lavellan's skin.

"You are not a weapon," Dirthamen said, voice soft. "And you are not even mine, not truly."

The agitation hardened, made it feel as if his skin had been pulled too tight.

"I am! I *am* yours!" He met Dirthamen's eyes, a taut sensation wrapping around his head. "And I had sworn to be your hidden blade, to protect and fight for you, to protect and fight for the empire and the People."

"I am not discrediting your contributions, far from it. You have done incredibly, and you *are* my best spymaster. But that is not all you are."

He gritted his teeth. "Then *what am I*?" he snapped and grabbed Dirthamen by the lapels of his robe. "What am I if I'm not a weapon? What am I if I'm not *useful*?" His aura burst, slipping from his grasp, the mess of his emotions flaring like an untameable storm. "What do I have going for me besides decades upon decades of aimless wandering and constant fear of descending into stagnation or chaos? *What*?"

Dirthamen stared, stunned. Lavellan's hands shook.

Shit—

Lavellan let go and took a step back. Now he'd gone and done it—

Dirthamen reached for him. Lavellan didn't have time to register what was happening before he found himself pressed against Dirthamen, his arms wrapped around Lavellan.

"What— Ma Ven—"

He embraced Lavellan tighter.

Lavellan stayed frozen, his head feeling as if a band had wrapped tight around it. All his thoughts were hitting a brick wall, never coming to fruition.

Dirthamen was warm.

His agitation bled away, coaxed by that warmth. The churning of his aura calmed. Tentatively, he brought his arms up and wrapped them around Dirthamen in return. Something tight settled in his chest, but it wasn't the unpleasant tightness from before. The familiar scent of Dirthamen's fragrance wrapped around him like a shawl, masking most of the lingering smell of metal from his practice of blood magic. It may be unsettling for most but... for Lavellan, it was safety.

He closed his eyes and rested his head on Dirthamen's shoulder.

The world was wide and vast, but he wouldn't mind if it narrowed down to just this for the moment.

"Are you loyal to me because I am a god?" Dirthamen asked.

"No," Lavellan whispered. "Because of who you are. You were not a god when I chose to follow you."

"Then it is likewise for me." He pulled back and Lavellan lifted his head, but Dirthamen kept his arms around him. Their eyes met. The light from the window fell over the planes of Dirthamen's face, eyes as violet as the wisterias that Lavellan had planted. "I admit that initially, I did only see

you as a powerful weapon. I had enjoyed the novelty of you. But... you are so much more. And from the depths of my heart, I sincerely apologise for the way I've conducted myself."

He cupped Lavellan's cheek, warming the chilled skin. Lavellan's heartbeat stuttered. Dirthamen hadn't done this in a while.

"I care about you because you are important to me," said Dirthamen. "Not because you are my spymaster or my best agent, but because of you as a person."

Lavellan's thoughts stopped for good this time.

The aura that Dirthamen would always keep so carefully hidden or controlled revealed itself, unfurling like the wings of an emerging butterfly. It wrapped around him, reassuring, but the depths of it were immeasurable. Something secret, kept close to the heart. It flooded Lavellan's lungs, made him feel as though a hearth had made a home in his chest. It was the comfort of darkness, and the sway of auroras. There was so much, but Lavellan could still tell that Dirthamen was holding most of it at bay. But he needn't show all of it. Just revealing the first layer of his emotions spoke volumes.

Lavellan reciprocated, his aura pulsing with the love and trust he had for Dirthamen. Their auras met and melded.

Safe.

Lavellan stopped thinking for a while and simply... felt. Felt the arm around his waist, the weight and warmth of the hand on his cheek, the steady rise and fall of Dirthamen's chest, the emotions swirling within their shared aura.

Dirthamen pressed their foreheads together.

They stayed like that for a while. Lavellan wasn't sure how long for; he hadn't been counting, and he never wanted it to end.

There was a knock at the door.

Some of Dirthamen's irritation bled into their mixed auras and Lavellan chuckled.

"Don't you have a celebration to attend with Lady Sylaise, tonight?" asked Lavellan. "It's likely your retinue here to prepare you."

They pulled away from each other slowly. Lavellan felt a little adrift, uncertain about what to do with his aura. He pulled it back into himself because that seemed like the safest bet, and Dirthamen did the same and retracted his hand.

"Please consider what I said," murmured Dirthamen. "You are a person."

Lavellan stared at him, then dropped his gaze and nodded. "I will leave you be to prepare."

He headed for the wall that led to the hidden corridor and opened it, then looked back over his shoulder. Dirthamen was still watching. Lavellan gave him a small smile and Dirthamen returned it.

Lavellan stepped through and closed the door, leaned against it, a touch shaky.

Behind Tarasyl'an, a narrow path that wound down the side of the mountain. At the end of the path rested a lone, dogwood tree growing out stubbornly from the side, flowering all year long despite its deciduous nature. It was peculiar yet fitting. Of course a stubborn tree that grew where it shouldn't and flowered despite its nature would be near Solas' fortress.

Lavellan sat beneath it and stared out at the snowy mountain range. He picked up a fallen dogwood flower and twirled it by the stem, its petals as white as the snow on the mountains.

Someone sat beside him, the rings in their hair clinking.

"I see you've found it," said Solas.

"This tree's as stubborn as you."

The snowy wind howled, chilled Lavellan's cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Solas asked, tone gentle.

"I—" Lavellan stared at the dogwood flower. "I feel strange."

Solas looked at him, his aura brushing against Lavellan gently in encouragement.

"You two have been talking about me," Lavellan muttered.

"I had not known that he was talking about you, at first. He merely came to me seeking advice about a personal matter, which also connected to a larger issue at hand."

"Which is?"

"Slavery."

He looked at Solas.

"You are a slave," Solas said bluntly.

"I walked into it."

"And that makes it right? Because you asked for it? Because you consented to being owned?" He shook his head. "No. And the fault does not lie with you. You thought becoming his slave was the highest form of declaring your loyalty and devotion?"

Lavellan hesitated, then nodded.

"Because you had been led to believe so. There are other ways of declaring your loyalty and devotion without being bound to them, mind, body, and soul. But they have twisted your admiration, devotion, and loyalty. They force you to work to the bone in service of a corrupt empire." His face pulled tight, a pained light in his eyes. "I have watched my soldiers toil with only faith and patriotism to sustain them. That is how they turn you obedient. By giving you this higher purpose."

"But it isn't false." He tossed the flower and it fluttered down the side of the mountain. "You fight for the People, for their safety."

"Yes, but are the soldiers not a part of the People? Are *you* not a part of the People? Should you

not fight for your own safety and welfare? And what even constitutes the People?"

When it's the People against the People, who do you protect then?

"They wish for you to fight for a specific group of the People only," said Solas. "And when you know this, and when you see the friends you have fought with side by side utter with their dying breaths, 'For the empire,' then..." His gaze saddened, his aura dimming. "Then you cannot help but ask if all this death and sacrifice is worth it. And you fear the answer. Yes or no, either answer has frightening implications."

Lavellan clenched his hands over his thigh, gripping the material of his trousers. Everything within him was rejecting what he was hearing, but he forced himself to sit through it.

"And while Dirthamen and Mythal see this," Solas continued, "their hands are tied."

Lavellan frowned. "They are the Evanuris. They are the highest authority."

"Power is liberation, is it?"

"Is it not?"

"That is not what I see. Dirthamen and Mythal... They are not sitting upon their throne; they are shackled to it." He looked at Lavellan, gaze heavy and grim. "No one here is free."

Something thick rose in Lavellan's throat.

"Abolitionist intentions will be met with incredible resistance within the family," Solas said, "and within the empire. Within the slaves themselves. Think of your circumstance. Look at how you clench your fists; look at how much effort it is taking for you to listen. How many slaves would feel the same way, having been fed the same lie as you?" Solas gestured out, as if pointing at the entire world. "When something has deeply taken root, it will be difficult to uproot and displace. There will be a large opposition."

"Change is never quiet, I suppose," he mumbled.

Solas smiled at him, a glint in his eyes. "Mythal and Dirthamen cannot make overt movements, not yet. Not while we are in a precarious position, under attack from the Forgotten Ones. In the meantime, I will be working to gather noise for when we need it."

Lavellan stared at him. "Not yet?" he repeated.

"Do you feel it? There is change waiting to happen."

He hugged himself and looked out at the skies. "Be careful," he murmured. "This one feels turbulent. Unravel it carefully or else it will descend into decay."

"It would help if the embodiment of change himself were there to guide us."

Lavellan faced Solas, brows raising. "What?"

"I am not asking you to make a choice now. It is simply an offer."

"I'll... keep it in mind. I'm still just—" He rubbed his face. "I don't know who or what I am if I'm not Dirthamen's weapon."

"You are you."

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Then perhaps it may bear investigating,” he suggested.

Lavellan frowned at his hands, could think of nothing else to say. Solas stayed with him in the quiet.

Another breeze coasted by, dislodged some of the dogwood's petals and leaves. Solas held out a hand and a leaf fell on his palm. He blew on it and the leaf joined the wind once more. Lavellan glanced at him. In moments of lull like this, Solas looked serene, and Lavellan could glimpse the truth of him underneath.

“I’m sorry,” said Lavellan.

He frowned. “What for?”

“I’m sorry that you were called to fight instead of guide. I hope that one day, you can rest and be at peace with the world and yourself.”

Solas stared at him, caught off-guard. “I— Thank you.” His gaze softened and he smiled. “You may be coated in shadows, Ras, but I know you are a bright soul. There is a light and warmth within you.”

Lavellan’s ears warmed and he turned away. “You’re being ridiculous.”

He chuckled. “I am not. I hope that one day, the world will see what Dirthamen and I do. Your current circumstances require for you to remain obscured, but... perhaps in another life, the world can see how warm and bright you truly are. Perhaps even in this life. You can never be sure what will change.”

Lavellan pulled Solas’ hood over his head and laughed at his indignant noise.

“Ridiculous,” Lavellan said again.

Solas pulled his hood back, eyes glimmering from his smile. Lavellan shook his head, still laughing softly as he looked back out at the mountains. The breeze ruffled his hair.

For a while, only the whistle of the wind, the chime of the rings in Solas’ hair, and the rustle of leaves could be heard. The dogwood tree swayed.

Lavellan closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then, he said, “Lavellan.”

“Lavellan?”

He opened his eyes and smiled at Solas. “My name.”

Bright yellows sparked in Solas’ aura, followed by a burst of deep gold. He smiled back. “It is a lovely name, Lavellan.”

“Thank you,” he said, warm despite the cold wind.

"You are a person."

"You are you."

Lavellan buried his head in his hands, the light of dawn streaming in through the balcony doors across his bed, his crystal lanterns refracting the sunlight into a myriad of colours. He hadn't been able to sleep.

"You are not mine, not truly."

Then... what? Who was he? What was he?

Someone knocked. Lavellan raised his head and stood, walked to his door, and flicked his wrist to open it.

It was Vedir. They smiled and raised a covered wicker basket.

"Picnic breakfast in the garden?" they asked.

Lavellan blinked at it, then shrugged. "Why not?"

They made their way to the overlook in the garden, where a blanket had already been set up with some plates and cutlery. Lavellan raised a brow at Vedir.

"Already knew I would say yes?" he asked.

Vedir laughed. "I had a feeling that you would need a little quiet time." They sat on the blanket and Vedir uncovered the basket. "Let's eat!"

He and Vedir chatted as they ate, and Vergala joined them halfway through, stealing all of Lavellan's berries. A few of the El'amelan swung by to snag some food from the basket. Vedir smacked their hands away but Lavellan threw them some food whenever Vedir wasn't looking.

Once Lavellan and Vedir had their fill, they eased into a sated quiet, watching the mist clear from the sea of trees beyond them as the sun rose higher in the sky.

"Our empire is rotting, Vedir," Lavellan said.

"I know," they murmured.

"So why are you still helping me try to keep it afloat?"

"Well, what else can I do?" A white butterfly perched on the wicker basket. Vedir held out a finger and the butterfly perched on it instead. "Different people do different things to help. Mythal works tirelessly to manage her family and the empire. Dirthamen tries to ease the weight off her shoulders by keeping everything else in order from the shadows. You try to ease the weight off his shoulders in turn, while making sure you do your jobs properly so the innocent don't suffer." Vedir smiled at the butterfly. "And Solas punishes those who would exploit, while granting the downtrodden protection."

The butterfly flew away.

"And I," said Vedir, "think that helping you manage the El'amelan as well as lending my visions is the best way to help. Because I know that the man I am working for cares."

The answer was sweet, but it only worsened the lost feeling within him. “You trust me that much?”

“You have offered your hand, and you have always listened.”

“My intentions weren’t benevolent in the beginning. I needed spies. I chose those who had nowhere to go, nobody to turn to, and put them through severe training. I removed your shackles but replaced them with a different kind.”

“Yes,” said Vedir. “But you didn’t need to care about us. You didn’t need to buy us gifts after you saw something that reminded you of us. You didn’t need to exact revenge when one of us had been wronged. You didn’t need to entertain our idiosyncrasies and nurture our personalities.”

Lavellan scoffed. “Vedir, that doesn’t erase how questionable the original intention was.”

“No, and I never said it did.” They shrugged and leaned back on their hands. “Just that you never could stop yourself from caring. I know you were taught to be cold and detached, but...” They grinned at him. “You never do as you’re told, huh?”

Lavellan blinked at them, then burst out laughing, recalling all the times Thalamya had made him sit and meditate under a powerful waterfall as punishment for defying her orders and making trouble.

He felt lighter after his laughter abated, but his smile faded, his grey mood returning.

“I don’t know who I am outside of being a weapon,” Lavellan admitted.

“I think you do know. You just weren’t given the chance to step forward, but now you have a space where you’re safe to be you.” Vedir stood and dusted off their robe, then offered their hand. “But it never hurts to get some help with it.”

Lavellan stared at the offered hand. He’d been the one offering his hand for so long, but he’d never been on the receiving end of it.

Something golden and warm grew in his chest. Something beginning to sprout. He grasped Vedir’s hand and let them pull him up, as if they were reaching into murky waters and plucking him out of its depths, letting him taste crisp air and clearing his lungs of muck. The muddy water would cling to his skin for a while, but it would dry. One day.

“Let’s start with hobbies!” Vedir chirped. “Something that doesn’t have to do with stabbing or shooting or studying. You cook for us sometimes, right? Onwards! To the kitchen!”

Lavellan chuckled. Vedir yanked him along and his chuckles turned into a yelp.

Chapter End Notes

Why is there a slow burn in my slow burn? It's like opening a pot of boiling water but surprise, there's another smaller pot using the heat from the boiling water to cook stew.

Also, I was looking back at previous chapters coz i needed to refer to some memories and holy shit, why did I make the chapters so LONG??? I really made yall sit through 7K WORDS 😊 Good lord

Within a sanctuary

Chapter Notes

Early update? Hell yeah! Because I really wanted it to land on the same day I published this fic a year ago.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3119 FA |

There were whispers among the slaves. There was a sanctuary in a valley, they said. Guarded by the meanest wolf of all.

| *???, Elvhenan* | 3156 FA |

He found a slave with her newborn child hiding in a small, boarded-up room of a nobleman's estate, in desperate need of escape and shelter.

He asked Vergala to send a note to Felassan, and Lavellan snuck the mother and her child out of the estate, passing through a series of eluvians to the one which exited out into an abandoned watchtower on a hill.

Felassan stood waiting outside the tower, a lone and moonlit figure.

"I thought you'd gotten rid of that eluvian," said Felassan as he turned to face them. "It was so long ago since we last used it. For that Forgotten job, right?" He glanced at the mother and child, then back to Lavellan in question.

"They need sanctuary," Lavellan explained.

Felassan's eyes widened, before his expression turned grim. "Of course." He smiled at the mother and offered his hand. "I know a place. Nobody will ever find it, and it is full of other inhabitants who can help you care for your child. There are supplies and amenities and protection. You will want for nothing."

The mother shot Lavellan an uncertain look and he smiled in encouragement. She held her child closer, a sorrowful yet hopeful and determined light in her eyes, and went to Felassan.

Felassan placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and nodded at Lavellan. "We'll take care of them."

Lavellan nodded back.

Felassan hesitated, before he reached into his pocket and threw something at Lavellan. Lavellan caught it and opened his hand.

A keystone.

“I’ll ask him to open a new eluvian for the sanctuary’s network near this hill,” said Felassan. “Just use that keystone to open it.”

Lavellan closed his hand around it. “Thank you. Don’t tell him it was me.”

“Why not?”

“Safety.” It would be better not to risk Lavellan being connected to Solas’ efforts. He also didn’t want to add to Dirthamen’s headache. He was supposed to be *easing* the burdens, not adding more.

Lavellan turned and left.

The keystone was used many, many times after that.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3491 FA |

Dirthamen gifted him an earring.

Lavellan stared at it for a long time in his room, all of him warm once again.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3500 FA |

Elvhenan was celebrating its seventh Quincentennial.

The Quincentennial was a week-long commemoration of Arlathan’s founding, celebrated every five hundred years. On the final day, the Evanuris would make a formal appearance together with their High Priests to fortify Arlathan’s protective wards. To bless the city, as it were.

And every Quincentennial, without fail, Lavellan had to stop some insidious plot.

He posed as a servant and collected his information from the gossip and rumours. Once he’d gotten what he needed, he prepared to leave—

“Oh dear,” said Nadalyn, the head of Dirthamen’s retinue. She was one of the few who knew that he was Ras, and she’d been Dirthamen’s retainer for so long and had always acted with utmost confidentiality that she’d earned some of Lavellan’s trust. She was his main contact within the servants of Dirthamen’s court.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

She frowned at the scroll in her hands. “Fernasyn fell down a flight of stairs. We have no time to find a replacement to arrange Lord Dirthamen’s hair.”

“I can do it,” he said.

She blinked at him. “Are you certain? Aren't you preoccupied?”

“I have some time. And experience.”

Nadalyn stared down at her scroll in worry, then she sighed. “Thank you, Ras.”

He went with the retinue to Dirthamen’s bedchamber and kept his head bowed.

Lavellan waited as the others prepared Dirthamen, dressing him in the ceremonial garb, layers upon layers of cloth that were light and billowing. The final overcoat was richly patterned and dark, shimmering with an iridescence reminiscent of a raven’s plumage, the fabric attached to its long sleeves reaching the floor. Last came the sash which matched the overcoat’s design, but the patterns on it were moving a subtle and tasteful amount. Not enough to be an eyesore.

He looked regal. When he moved, the ceremonial attire flowed with him, looking as if he were trailing shadows behind him.

Dirthamen sat while Lavellan prepared his supplies and Nadalyn conjured a mirror in front of them. Lavellan then set to work, carding his fingers through the dark strands. The other retainers bowed and left. Nadalyn patted Lavellan's shoulder in thanks and left with them. It was usually the servant tending to the hair who would remain the longest.

“You are not my usual stylist,” said Dirthamen, looking at Lavellan through the mirror. Lavellan kept his head down and focused on his task, biting back a smile. Would Dirthamen recognise him?

“No, ma Venuralas,” he replied, having altered his voice. “Your usual stylist has fallen down a flight of stairs.”

“Is she alright?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“I hope you were not the one to push her down,” said Dirthamen, a smile in his voice. “I recall you were unhappy with how she’d tended to my hair last time.”

Lavellan paused, then let out a small chuckle. The jig was up, then. He changed his face and voice back to his true ones.

“No, I did not,” said Lavellan, “but one of the loops *had* been loose.”

“Fussy,” said Dirthamen, leaning his elbow on the armrest and resting his cheek on his hand, smiling as he watched Lavellan’s reflection. “You do not have to attend to me.”

“I know,” Lavellan murmured. “But I like doing this for you. It isn’t out of obligation. I’d do it anyway, whether you were a god or a simple farmer.” He gently lifted Dirthamen’s head. “Keep your head still for me, please.”

It was quiet for a while, and Lavellan concentrated on the arrangement, braiding and pinning and combing and twisting. Dirthamen’s eyes slipped shut at some point, head tilting back into Lavellan’s touch, and Lavellan smiled.

“Something wrong always happens during a Quincentennial,” said Dirthamen. “What is it, this time?”

“Assassination attempt on one of your High Priests. I need to be at a high position tonight to watch over him.”

“Will you go as a [Haurasha'len^{\[1\]}](#)?”

The Haurasha'len — a group of favoured slaves. They had a high rank in court and were very involved with the politics. But—

“No, even higher. Your personal attendant for the night. I may just have to disappear every so often to ensure everything is running smoothly.”

Dirthamen opened his eyes, expression tightening. “Ah.”

Lavellan glanced at his reflection. “Not to your liking? I’ll ensure my absences aren’t conspicuous.”

“No, it is not that. Merely, I already have an attendant assigned.”

“I can dismiss them.”

He pressed his lips into a thin line. “No, this attendant is Falon’Din’s... gift. Falon’Din has been more willing to focus on his duties again after Mother had... humbled him.”

Beat the shit out of him, you mean. Bloodied at his own temple for his overindulgence, neglect, and ambition.

“In return, I’ve been letting him drag me away from work to do something frivolous,” Dirthamen continued. “This is a part of that deal. He believes I need *company*.”

Lavellan paused, then resumed his braiding. “Company.”

Dirthamen used his aura to convey just what kind of company Falon’Din meant.

“Oh,” said Lavellan, something unpleasant curling in his stomach. “I see.”

“I’ve decided to entertain his whims.”

Lavellan tried to keep his voice even. “To what extent?”

Dirthamen stared at him but Lavellan focused on his hair.

“I will humour it, but no further,” said Dirthamen. “I have no plans to bed this attendant.” That eased some of the unpleasant feeling, but not by much. “But that still means you cannot be my attendant.”

“I need to modify my plans then,” said Lavellan, rambling on about his ideas to brush aside the tight feeling festering in his chest. “It seems I’ll have to go as a Haurasha after all,” he sighed. “Find the right noble to attach myself to.”

He disliked being a Haurasha'len since being one attracted attention — and touch — but it had to be done. He’d just grit his teeth through it.

Once Lavellan finished the arrangement, he placed the hair ornament over Dirthamen’s head and

stepped back to examine his work with a pleased smile.

“There,” he said and held up one of the small mirrors so Dirthamen could see for himself.

“Well done,” Dirthamen praised, not even looking at the mirror. Lavellan’s smile widened as he put the mirror down. “Thank you.”

Lavellan made his preparations and chose an alluring face and an ornate robe, painting his face suitably.

And for the final touch...

He put on the earring Dirthamen had gifted him with.

There was much to be said about Lavellan’s astuteness. He could read most people like a book, he could discern fear, disdain, respect, or otherwise hidden emotions with or without an aura. There were few he couldn’t ever truly read.

And apparently, his own self numbered among them.

It took a whole night of him stewing in simmering rage, lurking in the corner of the ballroom and eyeing the balcony where Dirthamen was seated with his attendant, to suspect what his true feelings were.

The attendant Falon'Din had chosen was fair-haired and pale, slight-framed, and beautiful. And he had the audacity to sit on Dirthamen’s lap while handfeeding him.

Lavellan heard his teeth grinding.

He distracted himself with his job and wound up successful, but he felt no sense of accomplishment. Just that sick feeling in his gut.

As the night wore on, Lavellan gave in to curiosity again and looked at Dirthamen and his attendant again, but they were gone. He frowned. Attendants were prohibited from leaving the celebrations early. The only reason they’d be gone with their god was because—

Dirthamen had said he wasn’t planning to bed his attendant.

Plans change, whispered a vitriolic voice in his head.

Lavellan left the Quincentennial feast.

Away from the festivities, away from the distraction of noise and colour, stuck in his dim room with the moonlight streaming in from his balcony door, Lavellan faced the truth.

He released the tight control he had over his aura and stared at its damning flicker around him.

Envy.

“Shit,” he whispered and paced the room. Lavellan changed his face back and ripped his accessories off him and placed them on the vanity without a care.

He hesitated at the earring.

Lavellan stared at his reflection with spite and kept it on, turning and heading to his balcony for some air. He gripped the railing and stared up at Arlathan hanging in the sky.

He just had to go and develop affections for the one man he shouldn't have developed them for.

“What am I doing?” Lavellan muttered in self-deprecation. Maybe it was because they spent so much time with each other. That had to be it. Proximity bred affection.

But Dirthamen was so kind, so clever, so loyal, so warm.

How stupid was he to not have realised this sooner? Had he caught this affection in its earlier stages, he could have squashed it. But no, he had to be a fool. Now he had to pay the price. No matter. With enough patience, he could dig through the soil and pull this deeply rooted thing out with gentle tugs.

The sound of soft footsteps and rustling fabric behind him broke his thoughts.

Lavellan reached for the knife in his sleeve and turned, brandishing it at—

Dirthamen.

Lavellan's mouth dried and he froze.

Oh, come *on*!

The emotions he'd quelled returned and Lavellan drew his aura in.

Dirthamen was in a simple robe, hastily tied and almost slipping off his shoulders, the careful arrangement of his hair ruined, as if someone had pulled at it. Lavellan's grip around the knife tightened but he lowered his hand and tucked it back into his sleeve. He forced himself to look away and up at the stars.

“Has there been an emergency?” Lavellan asked. “You never enter my room unless that is the case.”

Dirthamen stood beside him, placing his hand on the railing. “I do not enter your room often because you have not given me permission to.”

“You're free to come and go as you wish. You'd given me access to your room. It's only fair.”

“Of course I need your permission. This is a matter of your privacy. And I still have a choice to let you into my room or not as there is a hidden door. Your eluvian leads straight to your room on the other hand.”

“It’s fine.”

“It is not,” he insisted and Lavellan sighed, too tired to argue.

“Alright, I’ll lock the eluvian then. It will glow if you wish to enter and I have the choice to let you in or not.”

Dirthamen nodded. “Yes, good.”

“So *has* there been an emergency?”

“I thought there may have been. You usually visit after a mission to report and... Well, you did not show. I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

His heart warmed at the concern, but the twisting in his chest returned and doused it back in ice.

“I thought you were preoccupied,” said Lavellan. “I didn’t wish to intrude on anything private.”

“What gave you the impression that I was preoccupied?”

“It’s a well-known fact that if you leave with your attendant, you’d gone to fuck them.”

“Should I be insulted that you think we had already finished?” he asked, teasing. “That is not a very long time.”

Lavellan snorted. “You’re pent up. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I did not lay with him. He came with me at Falon’Din’s urging and I was too exhausted to argue. I let him escort me to my room then dismissed him.”

A spark of relief flashed in Lavellan’s chest.

“I was hoping you would help with my hair,” said Dirthamen. Lavellan glanced at him. “I tried to undo it myself, but I must have pulled something wrong.”

So that was why his hair was like that.

Lavellan couldn’t help his fond smile, the relief having doused most of his envy. This was terrible.

Emboldened by his relief, he reached for Dirthamen’s lapels and secured the robe. He wasn’t daring enough to retie the sash.

“I was in a hurry,” Dirthamen said in defence.

In a hurry to check up on Lavellan because he’d been concerned.

Lavellan stopped his smile from growing. “I believe you.” He grabbed the end of Dirthamen’s sleeve and tugged, pulling him into the room. “Come on,” he murmured and sat Dirthamen down on the bed. Lavellan lit the crystal lanterns with a wave of his hand, showering them with colour as he settled beside Dirthamen and worked on undoing his hair.

The locks of hair fell. Lavellan combed his fingers down the long length of it, reverent.

It was silent for a while, filled only by their soft breathing and occasional clinks from the pins hitting one another.

“Your room suits you,” Dirthamen said.

“Oh?”

He hummed, turning his head to take it all in. “Dark-panelled walls. But within...” He looked up at the lanterns. “A burst of warmth and colour.”

Lavellan almost dropped one of the pins.

“You’ve also kept the gifts the El’amelan have given you,” said Dirthamen. “This room is your heart.”

And now you’re in it.

Lavellan shook his head, as if clearing a persistent cobweb in his head. He pulled out the last pin. Was it any wonder then that he’d grown to love this man if he kept on saying things like that?

Dirthamen turned to face him. “Thank you,” he said, the colours from the lanterns turning his eyes warm.

“My pleasure,” he answered, gaze lowering. His heart was in his throat, displaced by the emotions that had swelled in his chest.

It was quiet for a moment, before Dirthamen reached for him and brushed his fingers against the earring.

“You wore it,” said Dirthamen, gaze softening. “As I thought, it suits you.”

Lavellan snorted because he was growing rather inarticulate.

Dirthamen chuckled at the response. “It’s true. I saw you a while ago.” He paused. “I thought you looked quite beautiful.”

The compliment caught Lavellan off-guard and his ears warmed. “Well, that—” Lavellan cleared his throat. “Good. I was meant to be a Haurasha so my face was meant to be appealing.”

“It does not matter what face you wear.” He placed his hand upon Lavellan’s cheek. Lavellan looked at Dirthamen, heart knocking against his ribs. “It is who you are which makes you beautiful.”

Lavellan could find no response. Any time he opened his mouth, an aborted sound would come out and his ears would heat even further.

Dirthamen smiled, a mischievous light gleaming in his eyes. “Ah, compliments undo you. Good to know.”

He scoffed. “They do not undo me, especially if they are empty.”

“They are far from empty.” The mischief in Dirthamen’s eyes had faded, replaced by a grave sincerity.

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Lavellan was sure he’d stopped breathing, desperately casting for answers in his head.

Dirthamen smiled after another extended pause. “You must be very tired tonight. I will not keep you up.” He retracted his hand as he stood.

Lavellan almost grabbed his hand to make him stay, but he didn't get the chance to because Dirthamen cradled the back of his head and brushed a gentle kiss over his forehead.

"Good night, my raven," Dirthamen murmured, honeyed voice curling around each word as if they were pearls to be sheltered.

Lavellan could only murmur good night back, watching Dirthamen leave through the eluvian, hand clutching his chest. He'd been delusional when he thought he could dig and pull his affections out by the roots.

"Shit," he whispered again, resigned to his fate.

| ???, *Elvhenan* | 3591 FA |

He encountered Solas after a mission and the two of them spent some time catching up with one another. Solas made no mention of the slaves Lavellan had led to the sanctuary. He didn't know then. Good.

Their conversation took them to a cliff with a view of the ocean stretching beyond, the wind whipping at their faces. They sat together in silence, staring at the horizon.

Lavellan snuck a glance at Solas. He looked so... tired.

"Are you alright?" asked Lavellan.

Solas didn't answer for a long moment, his exhaustion having tempered the proud fire in his eyes. Had it been centuries ago, Lavellan would have given anything to see the proud wolf humbled like this, but now... this wasn't right.

"They are relying on me to protect them," Solas said. "Some of them have gone through such sickening atrocities." Solas' aura tightened. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, brows scrunching. "I cannot continue with my *tricks*. They are but nuisances. I need more organisation, a strategy, a plan of coordinated attacks—"

"Solas," Lavellan said, firm but gentle, placing a hand on his shoulder, "I understand your frustration. Believe me, I do. But you said it yourself. Not now. Not yet."

Solas opened his eyes, turning towards Lavellan, expression twisting in frustration. "How am I meant to content myself with sitting still and doing nothing?" he demanded.

"You aren't doing nothing. Just continue looking after those who have sought your sanctuary. Listen to them, gather supplies, and make sure they're comfortable and are getting the care they require." He frowned. "We cannot afford division and civil wars right now. Mythal had bloodied Falon'Din decades ago for this exact reason."

He clenched his jaw, gaze falling. "I know. I simply... I dislike this helplessness."

"I know," he murmured. "But if we fall into chaos, the Forgotten will sweep in and destroy everything indiscriminately. Patience."

Solas took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He nodded. "Thank you, Lavellan."

Lavellan smiled. "You say my name as if you aren't allowed to say it."

“It feels almost criminal,” he said with a smile. “You hide yourself so well in the dark that it startles me when you come forward. But that is no complaint. I am honoured that you would trust me with it.”

“Very strange, isn’t it? I still trust you despite your endless headache-inducing lectures.”

“Lectures? They are prompts for introspection.”

“They’re overglorified speeches.”

“You incorrigible man.”

Lavellan laughed and Solas chuckled along with him.

They moved on to other topics, but while Lavellan was talking, he noticed Solas was staring intently at him.

“What?” asked Lavellan.

Solas tilted his head, scrutinising him. “I am attempting to memorise the colour of your eyes. It is my only indicator that it is you, outside of the cloak.” He leaned back on his hand. “The problem is that I know many people with golden eyes.”

“Try not to hurt your head too hard,” he teased. “The cloak is here for a reason.”

“I thought I saw you the other day, but it was another of the El’amelan. No, the cloak is not the most reliable way of determining your presence.”

“You know what? This could be fun. Maybe I’ll approach you while wearing different faces, but then I’ll also send other people with golden eyes. It’ll be like a test!”

“That is cruel,” he sighed.

Lavellan wagged a finger. “No, it’s brilliant!”

Lavellan didn’t test him right away, of course. He bided his time. There was no point if Solas was expecting it.

He waited for three years before he began.

Solas failed to recognise him the first five times.

The sixth time was accidental. Lavellan was posing as a servant to hunt for blackmail at a noble’s estate when he stumbled into Solas fiddling with a hidden compartment in the servants’ corridors. Solas spotted him and put a finger to his lips. Lavellan nodded, still playing the part of a meek servant, and tried to move past him.

Solas’ eyes sparked with recognition and he stopped Lavellan by the shoulder before he could pass.

“Ras?” asked Solas.

Lavellan put on a confused expression. “Do you require anything, Mirthadra?”

Solas faltered at Lavellan’s changed voice and searched his eyes. His aura twisted as he puzzled it out, then it dimmed in resignation.

“Have mercy, if it is you,” sighed Solas.

Lavellan dropped the confused look and laughed, the sound chiming in the empty corridor.

“Alright, I’ll take it easy on you. Congratulations, it *is* me!”

“Is this the first time?”

“Sixth.”

Solas groaned and Lavellan grinned.

Solas’ success in recognising him varied after that. But he was getting better.

| *Eir’duralas, Elvhenan* | 3601 FA |

Lavellan was sent to investigate an abandoned shrine in south Elvhenan where the weather was terrible and cold. He was called here rather last minute, and his cloak was with one of the El’amelan at the moment, so he stood shivering in the snow. What was a good warming spell—

He noticed a small group of elves crossing the snowy plains. Solas’ old soldiers. Felassan was with them. They weren’t interested in the shrine, and instead made their way to a small cottage near the foot of the snowy mountains.

Lavellan watched from a distance, frowning. What were they doing here?

Snow crunched behind him.

He turned and met Solas’ gaze.

Solas smiled. “Where is your cloak?” he asked. “And what are you doing out here?”

Lavellan blinked. That was the fastest he’d recognised him. “I left it with one of the El’amelan. You figured me out fast.”

“Eyes,” was all he said. He took off his wolf pelt cloak and draped it over Lavellan’s shoulders. It was still warm.

“You didn’t have to,” said Lavellan, but he was already clutching it tighter around himself. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

Solas nodded at the cottage. “We were visiting a friend. Would you like to come along? She always makes us broth and her cottage is warm. Unless you are preoccupied?”

“I just finished my job, so I suppose I’m free.”

His expression brightened. “Excellent!”

Lavellan smiled to himself as they walked to the cottage. Felassan greeted Lavellan cheerily once they walked in and dragged him to the front of the fire. The owner of the cottage was another of

Solas' old soldiers who had chosen to retire to this cottage, and she'd happily shoved a bowl of broth into Lavellan's hands.

He sat with Solas and his soldiers, listening to their stories, warm from the broth, the cloak, and the genial atmosphere.

Lavellan stole a glance at Solas. The edges of his face were soft from the firelight, orange flickering in his crystalline eyes. He looked at peace, the corners of his lips tilted up slightly. At some point, Solas had wormed his way into the list of people Lavellan loved. Him with his righteous pride and stubborn, too-caring heart.

And Lavellan always fought for the people he loved. What a troublesome, rebellious man to fight for. Defending him wasn't going to be easy.

So be it, he thought as he tightened the wolf pelt cloak around him.

Solas was able to recognise him most of the time from then on.

Chapter End Notes

In which Lavellan becomes a little less dense and becomes self-aware of his feelings. It probably really helps that he's starting to see himself as a person allowed to have feelings.

I can't believe it's been a year since I published this fic whew. Old and new readers alike, thanks for reading! :D

Also, pspspspsp you want [my Dirthavellan playlist](#) so bad. Pspspsp.

Translation

[1] **Haurasha'len**: Golden One; gold-blooded^{[↑](#)[↑](#)}

The ink upon your skin

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3834 FA |

Lavellan walked through the hidden corridor that led to Dirthamen's bedchamber and reached the door at the end of the wall. He knocked.

The door opened and he entered.

There was someone lounging on Dirthamen's bed, and Lavellan mistook him as Dirthamen at first, but the way he was sprawled out as he fiddled with the numerous bangles adorning his arm told Lavellan otherwise.

Falon'Din glanced up at him. "Ah, it's you."

Lavellan bowed. "My apologies, ma Venuralas. I'll take my leave."

"No, stay."

Lavellan frowned to himself, but he schooled his expression as he raised his head and closed the door behind him.

Falon'Din sat up and smiled at him. He and Dirthamen may look alike, but the way they conducted themselves differed wildly. Falon'Din was unreserved, indulgent, draped in the finest of clothes and adorned with numerous jewellery which made him look as if he was glowing.

"I was waiting for you, truthfully," said Falon'Din. "I knew you would appear eventually. You're likely confused, aren't you? Dirthamen told you to meet at this time."

"Yes. Is everything alright?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about. I just pestered him into getting something of mine just to send him away for a while. I wanted to catch you alone."

"You could have summoned me."

He waved a lazy hand, his bangles clinking. "That is so stiff and formal. I wished for an... informal meeting. Just a simple conversation, see? Pour me some wine. I'm thirsty."

Lavellan paused for a split second but he forced himself to move to where Dirthamen kept his wine and poured Falon'Din a glass. He walked over and handed it to him.

Falon'Din accepted it, not breaking eye contact as he took a sip. "You hesitated," he said.

Lavellan looked down in deference. “I deeply apologise. It won’t happen again.” He’d been too used to the agency he had with Dirthamen, but the rules were different with the others. He couldn’t afford to forget this.

“If I were my brother, you would’ve poured him a glass already, wouldn’t you?”

“You do not have to do anything you do not wish to,” said Dirthamen. “Not with me.”

“If he wants it,” Lavellan lied, remembering all the times he’d denied Dirthamen’s requests and suffered no repercussions for them.

Falon’Din swirled the glass in his hand and hummed. Lavellan wanted to tell him to get off Dirthamen’s bed lest he spill wine over it, but he bit his tongue.

“My brother is fond of you,” said Falon’Din. “You know that, right?”

It wasn’t a rhetorical question.

Lavellan recalled the earring, the gentle smiles, the adamanche with allowing Lavellan to enforce his own boundaries, warm hand on his cheek. A fleeting kiss on his forehead.

“I am of use to him and I do my job well,” Lavellan answered, voice defaulting to its neutral and detached tone. “I suppose that would earn some of his favour.”

“I cannot tell,” he said, “if you’re playing daft to protect him, or if you really are daft.”

Lavellan kept his aura and expression stoic.

Falon’Din raised the glass, staring at the wine inside. “Let me be blunt. Are you lovers?”

The question blindsided him. Centuries of experience with thinking on his feet, and yet this was the question that stunned him.

Falon’Din stared at him, waiting.

He didn’t know the answer. Lavellan loved Dirthamen in a way that lovers would, yes, but he wasn’t certain whether the love Dirthamen felt for him was the same. One could argue that Dirthamen’s actions may hold hints of romantic attachment, but Lavellan had no model to compare it with. It was rare for Dirthamen to let his guard down, so Lavellan couldn’t be sure whether his thoughtfulness was simply how he was with those he trusted, or if there was something deeper.

Either way...

“I wouldn’t presume,” Lavellan answered.

Falon’Din’s eyes sparked and he smiled again, head tilting in intrigue. “Interesting. That’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes.”

He stood and paced the room in a meandering pace, holding the glass so loosely that the wine was threatening to spill. *Don’t spill wine on the fucking floor—*

“Discounting me, my brother spends the most time with you. He lets you hear his music. He’s even given you access to his bedchamber. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s given you gifts.”

Lavellan stood still, following Falon'Din's movements with his gaze. Where was Dirthamen?

"He even turns away the attendants I handpick for him," continued Falon'Din. "When before, he would have enjoyed their company. I *know* what he likes, and I've never been wrong, so I found it curious that he'd rejected them. I thought he was just becoming a workaholic like our parents, but maybe that wasn't all of the reason." He glanced at Lavellan, appraising him, and smiled again. "That is your true face, isn't it? I've seen it, before you found a way to change it."

"Yes," said Lavellan.

He hummed. "I would have chosen you to attend to him, had you been an attendant. He would enjoy you." Falon'Din raised a brow. "Perhaps he already does? I *have* heard some rumours."

Falon'Din was the more exuberant and louder of the two, the light to Dirthamen's shadow, which was the exact image Dirthamen had wanted to cultivate. But that didn't mean Falon'Din was the less intelligent of the two. He could be just as cunning, just as ruthless, just as astute. What was Falon'Din after?

"What are you looking for?" asked Lavellan.

"Whatever you're hiding." He put the glass down and approached Lavellan, soon looming over him. Lavellan stood his ground, met his stare. "Fierce too, aren't you?" He gripped Lavellan's chin. Lavellan's skin crawled. "I think you would be fun to break."

"I kindly request that you stop touching me," said Lavellan evenly. Where was Dirthamen?

"Hm... denied." He grinned, sharp, and he looked and sounded so much like Dirthamen, but he was *not*. He wasn't warm, he wasn't considerate, he wasn't Dirthamen.

Where was Dirthamen? He wanted Dirthamen.

"Let me tell you this, Ras'virelan," said Falon'Din, leaning in and crowding Lavellan's space, the scent of his fragrance almost overpowering. "You are a very powerful thing, I won't deny. The sharpest of blades, the fastest of arrows. But if you ever turn your blade against my brother, none of your power will matter. So I hope your little... *meetings* with Fen'Harel is just a case of two friends catching up." He smiled, but it was cold, and he cupped Lavellan's cheek. "Solas is loud and yells an awful lot, and his words may sound convincing, but they're empty. Keep your blade sharp and stay in my brother's hand. He gives his love sparingly; don't waste it. That is all."

He pulled back and Lavellan could finally breathe.

"I am loyal to Dirthamen," said Lavellan, something in him burning with indignance. *How dare he touch me*— "And the People."

"Good!" he chirped and patted Lavellan's head. "We both just want the best for him, don't we?"

Lavellan stayed quiet, otherwise he might say something he'd regret.

The door opened and Dirthamen walked in, an irate look on his face. Lavellan relaxed.

"Falon'Din," Dirthamen snapped, raising a scroll in his hand. "It was not on your desk; it was in your bath's *closet*."

Falon'Din shrugged, smiling airily. "Ah, oops?"

Dirthamen smacked Falon'Din upside the head with the scroll and shoved it into his chest.

"I just remembered that I don't actually need it," said Falon'Din.

Dirthamen tried to smack him again but Falon'Din danced away and darted out of the room with a cackle, but not before he looked over his shoulder and sent Lavellan a sharp and meaningful smile.

Lavellan clenched his fists beside him, skin still crawling.

The door closed.

"He doesn't know, does he?" asked Lavellan. "That you agree with Solas?"

Dirthamen looked away. "No," he murmured.

| *Vir Dirthara, Elvhenan* | 3952 FA |

"You are a very hard man to find," said Solas and pulled up a seat across Lavellan.

"Good. That's the point." He put the scroll he'd been reading back into its cylinder and let the cylinder return to its shelf. This section of the Vir Dirthara was reserved for those within Dirthamen's court only. Dirthamen must have allowed Solas access to it. "This is a first, though. You willingly trying to find me. Is something wrong?"

Solas frowned, troubled. "Have you heard?"

"About? I just got back from a job far south. I've been away for a year, so I'm a little out of the loop."

"Have you gone to see Dirthamen?"

"No, not yet. I'm trying to finish up here so the Vir Dirthara would have records." Unease settled in his gut. He sat up straighter. "What's wrong? Is he in danger?"

"No, nothing of the sort. He..." Solas looked away, aura funereal. "He dismissed his personal retinue. Their holders had taken it to mean that Dirthamen was unhappy with their service and lashed them to—" His expression tightened, a hard light in his eyes. "To death."

Lavellan's face fell and a cold sensation slithered into his stomach. Nadalyn and the others—

"Why did he dismiss them?" asked Lavellan.

Solas opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head. "You are better off hearing it from him. And I suspect this has affected him more than he is letting on. He had the holder executed. For acting in his name, he'd said."

Lavellan stood. "I better go."

What the hell was going on?

"Whatever he tells you," said Solas, his gaze intense and swimming with an underlying meaning that Lavellan couldn't decipher, "know that it has been plaguing him for centuries."

Lavellan nodded uncertainly. He threw a farewell over his shoulder and used the eluvians to reach

the hidden corridor in Dirthamen's room.

He stopped at the end of the corridor, taking a deep breath. Then knocked.

A few seconds passed.

Lavellan raised his hand to knock again, but the wall glowed with the outlines of the door. He took a tentative step into the room, searching for Dirthamen.

He was at his desk, head buried in his hands.

Lavellan made his way over, placing his hand on Dirthamen's shoulder.

"I heard from Solas," murmured Lavellan.

Nadalyn's group had been Dirthamen's retinue for... a very long time. They would arrange his appearance for events, help him run his baths or clean his room. They were among his most trusted servants. Why would he dismiss them? Dirthamen hadn't been unhappy with them at all.

"I had not meant to—" Dirthamen started, then cut himself off. He raised his head and rested his hands on the table, staring down at them as he fiddled with his rings. He was quiet for a long time.

"Take your time," Lavellan said.

Another moment of silence elapsed. Dirthamen looked up at Lavellan, weary.

"Where have we gone so wrong?" asked Dirthamen and Lavellan blinked. He stood. Lavellan took his hand away from Dirthamen's shoulder and watched Dirthamen stand in front of his large window, looking out at Arlathan. "Elvhenan, our bright and broken empire. When did it all go wrong?"

Lavellan looked down, the weariness he'd been pushing aside returning to press down on him. When had it gone wrong, indeed?

"This is necessary, my family had said. That it was what the People wanted. That they needed us to—" Dirthamen slammed his hand against the glass and Lavellan jumped as the glass shuddered in its frame. He'd never seen Dirthamen this kind of angry. His anger was usually silent and cold, and there were rarely any outbursts.

Dirthamen fell quiet again and Lavellan waited, let him sort his thoughts out.

"Do you know how the vallaslin started?" asked Dirthamen.

"The People marked themselves with the vallaslin after the war to show their devotion. But some of the faithful who had marked themselves began to get obsessive, and their behaviour was endangering the others," said Lavellan. "So the inks from then on had been mixed with lyrium and was linked to a handheld node. The node could be activated to send a surge of magic into the vallaslin and incapacitate the person. It was a safety measure."

Lavellan was linked to Dirthamen's node, but Dirthamen had never once used it on him. The only instances that he'd seen Dirthamen use it was when a servant was a direct harm to Dirthamen, the others, or themselves.

"And now?" asked Dirthamen.

Lavellan hesitated.

"You are free to speak your mind," said Dirthamen, weary. "Time and time again, I have allowed you to speak freely. Please believe me. There are no hidden tricks."

Lavellan clasped his hands behind his back so Dirthamen wouldn't see him wringing them. He knew that, but it still... It still felt *wrong*.

"And now," said Lavellan, "they are used for the most trivial of things." The smallest mistakes would be punished so severely...

Dirthamen nodded. "The People wanted leaders," he said. "And we understood. We had just come from a war, and people were wishing for stability. We were that symbol of stability. The generals who had won the war. They wished for us to step up, to be their guides, to give them direction, and we agreed."

His hand clenched over the glass.

"Then the praising began. The prayers. The worship. We let it happen because that was what the People needed. They needed hope. We were not people to them, not anymore, but I had not realised it at the time." He lowered his hand. "I admit, I used to enjoy the worship. But the responsibilities, the difficult choices... I could not understand how my siblings couldn't feel the weight of it."

"No one here is free," Solas had said.

"Perhaps they did, but they chose to neglect it," said Lavellan. It was hard being the pillar of an entire empire, so they may have left it for others to handle. But those they had handed the duties to may not have been as capable or did not have anyone's best interests at heart besides their own.

"I am also to blame. I lay complacent, letting them do as they wished. I should have..." He trailed off, searching for the right way to articulate the cluster of his thoughts but failing.

"Why did you dismiss your retinue?"

"I wanted to show them my gratitude, so I released them from my service, granted them their own residences and promised to cover their financial needs for as long as they needed. I wrote this down in no uncertain terms, that this is my decree, and placed my seal on it." His expression twisted and he looked away. "They took my sealed message back to their holder, and their holder assumed they were lying and that they had stolen my seal from me to forge the letter."

Cold dread pooled in Lavellan's stomach. Rage burned in Dirthamen's gaze, the force of it so immense that his control over his aura slipped and Lavellan caught the flicker of it.

"The holder had them lashed a hundred times as punishment. None survived to the hundredth." Dirthamen's voice lowered in his anger. "So I lashed him myself. And I made him count. I healed him whenever he lost count so he could start over, and I told him we will continue until he reaches a hundred or until he dies. He managed to reach a hundred. Strong man."

He gave Lavellan a grim smile, the darkness in his eyes sending a chill down Lavellan's spine.

"I made him start over again," said Dirthamen. "He did not make it to ten, that time."

Lavellan didn't respond. His stomach churned. Lavellan had carried out grisly tasks of his own, his hands were as bloodstained and as filthy as they came, and by no means were the vengeance he'd exacted merciful, but this...

Somewhere along the path of revenge, one may come across the line, the final step. Lavellan never

could bring himself to step over it. Perhaps it was a preservative mechanism. A line subconsciously drawn to stop oneself from being consumed by such an overwhelming emotion. And Dirthamen had one foot over the line. Lavellan had to pull him back.

“You disapprove,” Dirthamen noted.

He ran a hand down his face, taking in a shuddering breath. “That was too far. You’re better than that.”

Dirthamen looked away, the rage in his aura dimming to the low roll of shame. Lavellan sighed. He walked up to Dirthamen and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“You want to make change?” Lavellan asked.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Then not like this. And not now, not yet. We’re in a delicate situation because of the Forgotten Ones. This is what I told Solas.”

Dirthamen glanced at him, the shadows beneath his eyes visible now that Lavellan was closer.

“The change you wish for will be loud,” Lavellan continued. “Violent. It will be a battle so uphill that it may as well be a cliff. But you and Solas are steadfast. If anyone can scale that cliff, it’s you two.” He tightened his grip on Dirthamen’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “But not now. Fight the war you are already in first.”

He gave a subdued nod but otherwise said nothing. Lavellan’s heart clenched. He reached for Dirthamen, tentative, gave Dirthamen ample time to pull back. But he didn’t. Lavellan embraced him. Dirthamen bowed so he could rest his head on Lavellan’s shoulder, almost slumping against him, as if his body could no longer hold its weight. Indeed, an empire was a heavy thing to carry. Lavellan rested his hand on the back of Dirthamen’s head.

Dirthamen wrapped his arms around Lavellan’s waist. “What would I do without you?” he mumbled into Lavellan’s shoulder.

“You’d manage,” said Lavellan, a smile pulling at his lips.

“Not for very long.”

Lavellan snorted, but the sound was faint and fond.

They said and did nothing else for a while, the silence punctuated by the synchrony of their breaths.

“Lavellan?” Dirthamen asked.

“Yes?”

He paused, was quiet for a while, then he lifted his head. His gaze was kind yet grave.

“Would you like to remove your vallaslin?”

Lavellan froze.

“You could ask Solas,” Dirthamen said.

His throat seized. “But... this is— It is a symbol of my loyalty.”

“And it is one of subjugation. I know you are loyal. You do not need a vallaslin to prove it.”

Lavellan couldn't answer. Remove his vallaslin? But it was such a large part of his identity. How could he—

It stood for all the wrong things, he knew, but—

“It is ultimately your choice,” said Dirthamen. “But please? Will you consider it?”

Lavellan tasted something bitter at the back of his throat.

He took a step back, away from Dirthamen's arms, and immediately felt cold.

“I have to go,” Lavellan whispered and fled.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3952 FA |

Lavellan went for a smoke.

Solas found him there, surrounded by misty colour, wallowing in the pleasant haze in his system to escape the uncertain tumult of his emotions.

Solas' face was bare. He'd removed his mark of devotion himself. How had he felt when he'd done it?

“I know you are loyal. You do not need a vallaslin to prove it.”

And that was the case with Solas wasn't it? Mythal's mark may be gone, but he was still loyal to her, still respected her, even if she was the reason he'd been forced to fight in the first place.

Lavellan found himself reaching for Solas as they were conversing, fingers ghosting over the planes of his face. Solas stilled, but he let Lavellan continue touching him.

“Ras,” he murmured and Lavellan was momentarily caught off-guard, had been used to Solas referring to him by name, but he recalled that they were in public. “What are you doing?”

“Observing.”

Solas had come through for Mythal, just as Lavellan had come through for Dirthamen. They both loved their deities, a love born of devotion, and over time, it had grown into something more sincere. Something beyond devotion.

So Solas would understand, wouldn't he? Understand the struggle, the meaning of the vallaslin, the conflict of it?

They continued conversing, words falling as easily as the smoke.

Solas would understand, wouldn't he?

Lavellan offered him the pipe.

“No, thank you,” said Solas. “I do not care for the burning in my lungs, no matter how enticing the

flavour and aroma.”

“So you’d prefer the flavour without the burn. Is that a metaphor?”

Because Lavellan would prefer to keep the vallaslin, and have it stand for something besides this wretched, binding thing. It was a physical reminder of something to fight for.

But he’d been fed lies. Lies about devotion, about service to an empire so rotten that it had twisted its very rulers or had filed them down to the bone with its weight.

No one here was free.

Physical reminder? To fight for what?

The People.

The people.

People gave things meaning beyond their intended purpose. People turned the world so beautiful with their creativity. The *meaning*.

He had to fight for the meaning.

Lavellan drew Solas in and let smoke pour between their mouths. The smoke curled, red to gold, blood to false glory.

Do you understand?

Solas accepted it, quiet as the smoke dissipated between them. His eyes closed. “You’ve been leading them to me,” he said, his breaths displacing the remnants of smoke remaining.

“Whom?”

He smiled. “The reports are the same. Some say an elf who is red of hair led them to the sanctuary. Others say he is battle-worn and dark-skinned, or curly-haired and freckled, or kindly and long-faced.” He took the pipe from Lavellan. “Yet two things remain constant: one, they always bore Dirthamen’s vallaslin. Two, they were all golden-eyed.”

Lavellan returned his smile but stayed quiet. Solas’ fingers curled around the back of Lavellan’s neck and pulled him close, smoke passing between them.

Do you understand?

Lavellan tasted the sweetness of the smoke, tasted a glimpse of this turbulent change they wanted to bring about.

Was it really alright to relinquish the vallaslin?

His and Solas’ gazes met again, Solas’ eyes alight with a fierce yet gentle and unknown emotion. Lavellan grabbed the wolf pelt slung across Solas’ chest, fingers digging into it as he breathed in smoke, expression twisting. Solas placed his hand upon Lavellan’s cheek. It was warm, too. Lavellan gritted his teeth and bowed his head.

“Show me,” Solas murmured.

Lavellan scrunched his eyes shut and let his aura spill just as he had done with the smoke, and

Solas breathed it in with the same silence.

Do you understand?

“I do,” Solas said and Lavellan let out a relieved sob.

“Solas, I’m tired. I’m so tired.”

“I know,” he replied, soft. “I am sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

Lavellan could feel the faint flickers of Solas’ aura. Hurt.

Hurt because Lavellan was hurting.

Solas shook his head, the rings in his hair clinking, glinting from the colourful lights around them. “Your loyalty and love will not disappear with the vallaslin. The physical manifestation of this love and care is in the form of your actions, not the ink upon your skin.” He paused. “But I understand why it is difficult to renounce. It has been with you for so long, and it has been instilled in you time and time again that it is the highest form of respect.”

He cradled Lavellan’s face and guided him to look up, then pressed their foreheads together.

“But you have broken through the wall of this lie,” said Solas. “Even if the process was painful, even if tearing the wall down brick by brick has torn the bed of your nails. You have clawed off the veil they have used to blind you even if it had bloodied your eyes in turn. And you...”

He pulled back and stared at Lavellan with so many unsaid sentiments swimming behind his eyes, and they remained unsaid because he’d hidden his aura again.

“And you deserve better,” Solas said, as final as the drop of an executioner’s blade.

Lavellan stared at him, eyes wide. He said it so certainly, as if Lavellan were someone he would raise a sword for. Someone he would fight for.

And Lavellan felt the same. Solas, Dirthamen, the El’amelan, the people who needed Lavellan...

He would raise his daggers and fight the very heavens for them.

It was time, wasn’t it? Lavellan felt safe enough to do so, but he still couldn’t stop his nerves from knotting so he masked it with a wan smile.

“Watch,” Lavellan whispered.

And Solas watched as bid. Watched, enraptured, as Lavellan’s face shifted beneath his hands.

Lavellan’s mouth dried, his heart racing from the tight tangle of nerves.

He rested his trembling hands over Solas’. “This is me,” he said, voice thin from having to squeeze through the thickness of his throat. “This is my true face.”

Solas was quiet for a while as he took it in, brushing a lock of hair away from Lavellan’s eyes and tucking them behind Lavellan’s ears. Gentle. Hesitant, almost.

“Lavellan,” Solas murmured, as if it were one of the secrets Lavellan would sometimes hold in his

mind. “Thank you.”

Lavellan’s smile widened.

He came to Dirthamen with a determined set to his lips.

“I’ll remove it,” said Lavellan.

Dirthamen nodded grimly.

Chapter End Notes

Hey remember when I said 12 chapters of flashbacks? Scratch that. Make it 15.

spritzes Falon'Din with water Shoo! (Note that Lavellan said he was loyal to Dirthy and the People but left out the empire)

Since Lavellan finally showed his true face to Solas, [come see his true face for yourselves!](#)

Anyway, hooray Solas for being the most (outwardly) sane one in this chapter today. (Must be nice having the actual spirit of Change advising both Solas and Dirthamen on how to reasonably achieve the change they want. It's almost like he's most of their impulse control. Man, I hope he doesn't die, that would really suck, right? Haha, yeah, would suck so bad. I'm sure he won't die though, that'd be crazy!)

Ar lasa mala revas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

| *The El'amelan's fortress, Elvhenan* | 3952 FA |

Lavellan waited in his room, pacing, biting at his lip and wringing his fingers, his heart clogging his throat.

The eluvian connecting to Dirthamen's room glowed. Lavellan stopped his pacing and stared at it, taking a fortifying breath in.

He waved his hand and unlocked it.

Dirthamen and Solas stepped in.

The three of them stared at one another, the silence crushing them all with its weight.

Lavellan's bedroom was his sanctum, and now Dirthamen and Solas stood within it, ready to strip away a part of himself. He clenched his hands by his sides and gave them a smile he couldn't feel.

"Come now, such sour expressions," Lavellan said in teasing. "You'll ruin your handsome faces."

They at least cracked a smile at that, but it didn't last long.

Lavellan looked down and chewed on his lip. Best get on with it. "So what do I have to do?"

"Make yourself as comfortable as possible," said Solas.

"Would you like me to leave?" asked Dirthamen.

"Please stay," said Lavellan, a hint of fear creeping into his voice. Dirthamen's expression softened.

"As long as you need me to, then," said Dirthamen, and Lavellan calmed.

Solas looked at Dirthamen. "Did you bring the node? It would help if I can examine it to determine how potent his vallaslin is."

Dirthamen reached into his robe and passed Solas the lyrium node, the blue crystalline sheen of it resembling the colour of the seas, metal filigrees ornamenting its surface. Such a beautiful thing with such a horrid implication. Solas held it grimly in his hands and walked towards Lavellan, hovering his hand over Lavellan's chest.

The node glowed. Solas' eyes widened. "Why is your vallaslin so potent?" he asked. "There is a high concentration of lyrium within the ink."

"I was volatile, they said. And I caused a bit of trouble on the island where I trained at."

He recalled all the times he'd lost control of his power, the debilitating surge of magic that would course through his vallaslin to immobilise him, the taste of lightning behind his teeth.

Solas dropped his hand and returned the node to Dirthamen. Both of them looked at it as if they wanted to hurl it out into the sea, but Dirthamen tucked it back inside his robe.

“The potency means the removal will be harrowing,” said Solas. “Once I start, I cannot stop, and I will have to go slow.”

Lavellan smiled wryly. “Then I guess you’re both stuck with me for a while.” He turned towards Vergala, who was watching from her perch, and he raised his arm. She flew to it and he held her close. “I’m going to put you to sleep, okay?” he asked. “I don’t want you to feel any distress.”

She nudged her head against his chest and he felt her concern and reassurance. *I’ll see you soon.*

“See you soon,” he whispered and passed his hand over her head. She fell asleep. Lavellan set her down on her pillow, then flicked his wrist, silencing runes flashing over his door. He’d seen Solas remove the vallaslin on other slaves before, and those with the more potent vallaslins had wept. Seeing as Lavellan’s was even worse, he suspected there would be some screaming.

He didn’t want the El’amelan to hear him.

Lavellan turned to look at Solas and Dirthamen. “Shall we?” he asked.

Solas nodded solemnly and glanced at Dirthamen. “Will you keep him in place, please? He will likely thrash during it.”

“Sounds very promising,” said Lavellan, untying his sash and removing his outer robe with shaky hands. He unlaced his shirt and opened it, staring down at the vallaslin stretching over his chest, down to the band of his trousers. The more inked you were, the more tethered you were to a node. Some slaves had their vallaslin over their whole body. It announced to everyone else that they were a difficult or volatile slave. Most would only have a vallaslin on their face, but again, Lavellan had to have it over the front of his torso because they’d declared him unstable.

Lavellan traced the golden lines of it, some following the curve of his ribs, reminiscent of wings.

He’d been relieved for it before. It was for everyone’s safety, they’d said. And yet Dirthamen had been able to teach him how to control himself.

Lavellan scratched his nails over the ink.

They just had to *teach* Lavellan. All those lies they’d said—

He wanted it gone.

He didn’t want it gone.

Dirthamen sat on the bed, back to the headboard. Lavellan sat in front him and leaned back against his chest, his heart knocking against his ribs in apprehension. Dirthamen hooked his arms under and around Lavellan’s shoulders and secured him in place while Solas sat on Lavellan’s legs and pinned them down with his weight.

No escape.

“Breathe,” Dirthamen murmured by his ear and Lavellan realised he’d stopped breathing. He forced himself to take a shuddering breath in, light-headed.

“Are you ready?” Solas asked softly.

Lavellan fisted his hands into the sheets. “No but do it anyway.”

Solas’ hands glowed emerald.

He pressed them over Lavellan’s chest—

Light flared, pain bloomed.

Lavellan’s sight washed with white and he let out a torn gasp. The sensation was searing, but it soon devolved into something far worse — a jagged knife incising into the skin. A barbed whip biting into the muscle.

His body jolted, tried to shake off that sensation, but it remained. Flayed his skin, down to muscle, down to bone.

He scrunched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, tried to ride the wave of pain. But no, it wasn’t a wave. It was a torrent. Merciless and agonising.

Lavellan bucked, but Solas’ weight was pinning his legs down. He tried thrashing, tried to turn his chest away, but Dirthamen’s arms were tight around his shoulders, kept him pinioned.

No escape.

He let out a strangled and gutted cry.

He couldn’t get away.

“Stay with us, Lavellan,” Dirthamen said, his voice almost lost amidst the pain and the ringing in Lavellan’s ears.

Lavellan screamed, grabbing the source of the pain — Solas’ hands. He tried to pry them off.

“Stop,” Lavellan cried, screamed himself raw. “*Stop!*”

Solas clenched his jaw, the light from his magic flashing in his eyes. But he didn’t stop.

Another pulse of pain pulled at him.

Lavellan wailed, nails digging into Solas’ arm.

“You’re almost there, Lavellan,” Dirthamen whispered. “You are doing so well. Just a little further. Hold on.”

“Make it stop,” he begged.

“It will stop soon, I promise. I promise.” He eased Lavellan’s hands away from Solas’ arms, his hold around Lavellan’s shoulders loosening.

Lavellan squirmed, tried to slip away.

Dirthamen tightened his hold just as quick and Lavellan collided back against his chest. He cried out again, in both rage and agony.

Make it stop, make it stop—

“Let me go!” he yelled, put his all into wrenching himself away, but Dirthamen and Solas didn’t

budge.

He screamed with each surge of electric heat, screamed the chorus of his peeling skin.

The seconds blurred into each other.

Lavellan wasn't sure how long he'd had to endure the removal, but once Solas was finished, Lavellan couldn't feel his throat.

He slumped, limp and exhausted and sweaty, his ragged breathing matching the wretchedness he was feeling throughout his body. His fingers were sore, blood under his fingernails. He glanced at Dirthamen and Solas' arms, both lined with thin cuts.

Lavellan looked down, traced unsteady fingers over bare skin, over his bare face. He glanced up at one of his crystal lanterns and caught his reflection.

Bare face.

Gone.

Emptiness pooled at the bottom of his heart.

"Lavellan?" asked Solas.

Loss washed over him. Tears slipped over his cheeks, which were already wet from the tears he must have shed earlier.

It was gone.

He sobbed.

Dirthamen held Lavellan tighter against him, his hand pressing against Lavellan's chest as a reassuring weight.

"It is done," Dirthamen said.

Solas brushed Lavellan's sweat-matted hair away from his forehead, touch cold and soothing.

Lavellan had no energy left in him to move or say anything else. He closed his eyes, still weeping, and he fell asleep to the sound of his grieving breaths, Solas' touch cool on his forehead, Dirthamen's hand a steadying weight on his chest.

A light flutter against his cheek woke him up.

Lavellan opened his eyes with some difficulty, staring up at the soft glow of lights within his crystal lanterns. His entire body felt battered. He caught movement from the corner of his eye and turned his head. The earlier flutter against his cheek had come from Vergala who was now placing a bunch of grapes beside his pillow.

You're up, she said and nudged the grapes towards him. *Here. Eat.*

He smiled and pushed himself up, but the blankets caught on something beside him. Lavellan turned his head towards the other side of his bed. Solas was sitting on the blankets, leaning against the headboard with his arms crossed and head bowed — asleep. That couldn't be comfortable for his neck.

Lavellan shuffled up and reached for him, tried to lift his head up without waking him, but Solas woke immediately.

They stared at each other.

“Ah,” said Lavellan. “I didn't mean to wake you. You just looked like you'd have an entire day with a sore neck to look forward to.”

Solas said nothing, placed one hand against Lavellan's forehead and his other hand's first two fingers against the pulse point in Lavellan's neck. He nodded after a moment of silence and retracted his hands.

“Good. You are no longer feverish, and your pulse has returned to normal.”

Lavellan looked down. His shirt had been laced up again. He looked around him in silent question, but Vergala and Solas were the only ones in the room with him.

“Dirthamen had to return,” Solas answered.

Ah, had he been that transparent?

“How do you feel?” asked Solas.

“Like Elgar'nar hit me with a metal pole.” He accepted the grapes Vergala gave him. “But also... as if I've lost something.”

“You did lose something,” Solas murmured.

Lavellan ate the grapes so he'd have an excuse for his silence. Once the small handful ran out, he twirled the empty branch between his fingers.

“How long will this feeling of emptiness last?” asked Lavellan.

“A while,” said Solas with the sorrow of someone who'd gone through it himself. Lavellan's gaze softened.

“Were you alone when you removed your vallaslin?”

“I was.”

Lavellan didn't ask if it had hurt. “You do this often,” he said instead. “With those in your care. You're not just their physical defender; you're also their emotional pillar. That... cannot be easy.” All the panicked weeps and grieved sobs...

He smiled and shook his head. “Do not concern yourself with me. Besides, the sanctuary has become a community. They care for one another.”

“Of course I'll concern myself with you.”

“You are shouldering enough.”

“We’re all shouldering our own weights. There’s no shame in leaning against someone you trust when you stumble.” Lavellan placed the empty branch away and looked him in the eye. “You don’t have to be alone.”

Solas stared, eyes wide, lips parting in surprise. His aura retreated into him and he looked away from Lavellan. Lavellan didn’t comment on it. His words may have hit something vulnerable and he wouldn’t deny Solas his desire to hide any vulnerabilities he wasn’t ready to reveal.

“Do you have any plans?” was what Solas said next. “You are no longer bound to Dirthamen’s service. You can do whatever you wish.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to the removal if I didn’t already have a plan.” Lavellan looked out his balcony doors.

“Then...” Solas reached into his robes and pulled out a thin canister the size of Lavellan’s smallest finger, arcane patterns carved on its surface. He placed it in Lavellan’s hand. “You should have this.”

“What’s this?” He rolled it between his fingers in inspection.

“A mana reservoir. It has been charged by my focus. I assume you will be using illusions to make it seem as if you still have the vallaslin. Use the reservoir to power the spell so that it does not consume your own mana. It should last a few decades. Come back to me if you ever need it recharged.”

Lavellan closed his fingers over it and smiled. “Thank you.” He looked out of his balcony again. Someone had opened it so that the alpine breeze could sweep into the room. “I was wondering if I should ask the El’amelan about their vallaslin. If they want theirs removed.”

“There is no harm in asking. And I have plenty of reservoirs. I suspect your agents will need it since some are not as anonymous as you are.”

He clasped Solas’ shoulders and squeezed it, conveyed the extent of his gratitude with his aura. “Thank you for this. Thank you for always being there when I need you. I am here if you ever need me in return, this I swear.”

Solas hesitated, before he placed his hand over Lavellan’s. “Thank you. I... That means a lot to me.”

“If our lives now were to somehow end, I hope we find each other again in the next life and that we become friends once again.”

He smiled. “Provided we argue first.”

Lavellan laughed. “I’m sure we can find something to yell at one another about.”

Lavellan asked the El’amelan if they would like their vallaslins removed.

Some came forward, eager to lift the ink from their skin.

Some hesitated.

It was alright. Lavellan would always be there for them no matter their choice, and he knew they would be there for him no matter his choice. Because they were each other's family.

Lavellan took a deep breath before entering Dirthamen's room. They hadn't seen each other since the removal, but maybe that was because Lavellan was avoiding him. He was still wrought with apprehension and uncertainty about the future but now he was sure he'd collected himself enough to face Dirthamen.

Dirthamen was standing in front of his window again, but he turned to face Lavellan, and they stared at one another.

Neither of them could see the line that had been drawn on the sand anymore. The tide had come and erased it.

There was change brewing in the horizon.

There was no going back.

Dirthamen smiled. "You are free from me. If you wish to stop being my spymaster, I understand. You can do whatever you wish."

"Would that not cause you complications?" Lavellan asked and walked up to him. "Your spymaster suddenly disappearing?"

"I'm certain we can fabricate a believable and reasonable tale."

Lavellan snorted and stood beside him as he looked out the window "And who else can fill my role?"

"There's Gishanth."

"Are you kidding me? He's half as quick and twice the bore and wouldn't dare ever tell you you're being an idiot to your face."

Dirthamen sighed. "He is my next best agent."

"But is he as fun as me?"

He opened his mouth.

"No," Lavellan cut in. "He's not. Where would you be if I'm not here to liven things up? You'd work yourself to uthenera and get lost in the Beyond without me."

Dirthamen stared at him. Lavellan stared back, daring him to challenge his claims.

Then Dirthamen laughed and Lavellan grinned, the sound of his laughter softening the jagged edges of Lavellan's doubt. Maybe things would be alright.

"See?" asked Lavellan. "You think Gishanth is going to make you laugh?"

"This is why Gishanth dislikes you."

“I don’t particularly care.”

Dirthamen looked out of the window, still smiling. Lavellan pretended he was looking out as well, but his gaze was on Dirthamen’s reflection.

“What do you plan then?” asked Dirthamen.

Lavellan crossed his arms. “I’ve already made up my mind. I’ll keep being your spymaster. It’s easier to avoid suspicion this way and I want to keep the influence and connections I’ve accumulated. I have a feeling we’ll need it in the future. I’ll also keep herding lost, wayward souls to Solas’ doorstep. If I have to make an appearance without my mask, I’ll wear an illusion to make it look like I still have a vallaslin.”

“And the El’amelan?”

“Most of them are still trying to figure out what they want to do. In the meantime, they’ll keep doing jobs as well. Some want to remain. Some have already left.”

Dirthamen looked at him. “You’re really content to stay beside me?”

“I *want* to,” he emphasised. “If I ever want to stop, I promise to let you know. Unfortunately for you, you’re still stuck with me. If you want, consider me a freelance spymaster here to lend you his services for the foreseeable future.” He paused. “And even if I stop being your spymaster, we’re still friends.”

The smile Dirthamen gave him reminded him of a candle flickering to life in the dark.

“Yes,” said Dirthamen, voice as soft and warm and bright as that gentle candlelight.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 3985 FA |

While conversing with Dirthamen in the garden, a raven came and whispered in Dirthamen’s ear. Dirthamen frowned once the raven left.

“The other Evanuris wish to hold a meeting,” said Dirthamen. “To discuss how we’ll defend ourselves against the Forgotten’s attempts to use the poison.”

Lavellan pursed his lips. “I’ll wait in your room.”

Dirthamen nodded and they went their separate ways.

Lavellan returned to Dirthamen’s room and paced, staring out the large window with a small frown. He wasn’t certain how long he’d been waiting for, but when Dirthamen returned, he flung his door open and slammed it shut behind him, his expression stormy. He headed straight for his liquor cabinet and poured himself wine. Finished in a handful of gulps.

Lavellan grimaced. “Bad?”

He set the glass down a little forcefully and leaned against his desk, covering his eyes with his hand.

“They want to use the Blighted Titans,” said Dirthamen.

“What?”

Dirthamen took out another glass, poured wine, and offered it to him. “Wine?”

“Yes, please,” he muttered and took it.

“Mother and I objected.” Dirthamen scowled down at his glass.

“How could they use the Blighted Titans? The Forgotten dwell in the Void — that’s a separate realm. The Blighted Titans’ influence only encompasses the corporeal world.”

“Ghilan’nain has been investigating a red lyrium sample that she’d taken from one of the tunnels. She discovered that the red lyrium has diluted the potency of the poison within it. The Titan is... self-healing, in a way, filtering it. This process takes a long time, but it is still effective. So long as the Titan is still alive.”

“I swear, if this is heading in the direction of using the Titans as a filtration device...”

“That, and they’ve discovered that when the poison is extracted from the red lyrium, not only is it weaker, but it has also grown receptive to magic from the Fade. Normally, Fade and Void magic nullify one another, but...” He looked up at Lavellan, solemn. “This weaker form can combine with magic from the Fade if you use blood magic as a binding agent and lyrium as a catalyst. Doing so creates a new source of magic, stronger than any of the other sources.”

Lavellan stared at Dirthamen in shocked silence. A new source of magic—

There were only three known sources of magic: The Fade, the Void, and the blood. But now there was a fourth?

“But it is volatile,” said Dirthamen. “Too unpredictable. Disturbing the Titans may also trigger earthquakes and endanger people, but that isn’t stopping my family from coveting it. They’re now attempting to find a way to redirect the poison to the Titans once the Forgotten unleash it. If they are successful, the poison will be filtered, and this new source of magic can be harnessed.”

Lavellan drank the wine. “And what have they taken to calling this new source of magic?”

“Ghilan’nain has called it the magic of the Everything. Because it requires all known sources of magic and lyrium to create.”

“The Everything,” Lavellan muttered and rubbed his face. “What do you plan to do now?”

Dirthamen sat and buried his head in his hands. “I do not know yet. But we have time while they determine how to proceed with their plan. Ghilan’nain also needs time to perfect her method of extraction. We have a few centuries.”

But what could they do? If they stopped the Evanuris from pursuing such an inane plane, they would still have to contend with the Forgotten’s plan to unleash the poison.

Dirthamen looked out of his window, troubled, tracing the rim of the wine glass’ base. “For now, we continue with our tasks.”

“What are you going to do if the Evanuris asks you for help?”

“I am uncertain. If I decline outright, I may net Father’s ire and lead to a conflict between our courts. But agreeing is out of the question.”

So really, even if he had the voice to say no, what did that matter in the face of the overwhelming majority? It grinded at Lavellan but it must be grinding at Dirthamen even more. The most powerful position in the empire and yet that all amounted to nothing when it mattered.

...But maybe not nothing. There was one Evanuris left. Somebody untethered to the internal politics of the other Evanuris.

“Do you think we can ask Solas for help with deterring the Evanuris from progressing with this plan?” asked Lavellan. “I don’t know, just... disrupting transport of supplies, making places they need to go to as inaccessible as possible? Just to slow them down.”

“Possibly,” said Dirthamen. “Although, interfering as such will make my family deem him a problem that must be dealt with soon. It will place him in direct scrutiny.”

“I’ll discuss it with him.”

Dirthamen nodded. “If you please.”

“You need not ask twice,” said Solas.

Lavellan frowned. “Are you certain?”

“Dirthamen and Mythal’s hands are tied.” He clasped his hands behind his back and looked out at the plains stretching beyond — the view from one of the balconies in his sanctuary. Lavellan still wasn’t certain where the sanctuary was, and he didn’t try to find out. It was for the best this way. “The rest of the Evanuris do not deign to include me within their circle, but that is to my favour this time. I have no court, no large political responsibilities, and no throne that I am shackled to. I can move freely. More freely than you and Dirthamen, at any rate.”

“That will place you and your people in danger.”

“I have promised to keep this sanctuary safe, and safe it will remain. I will discuss this matter with my soldiers and agents and only involve those who wish to be involved.”

“Dirthamen and I will help you where we can. I’m not certain about what Mythal wishes to do.”

“Neither is she, but she says she will think up of a plan in time.” He sighed and shook his head.

“We cannot let the Evanuris succeed. Their greed for power may well be our undoing — and they will somehow be able to convince the People that it is necessary.”

They would convince everyone that their destruction was necessary, that this pursuit of power would pave the way for a brighter tomorrow.

Lavellan hugged himself and stared at the stones of the floor.

“Elvhenan,” Lavellan murmured. “Our bright and broken empire.”

Lavellan walked the corridors of Ghilan'nain's laboratory, dreading with every step he took. The others working within the laboratory stared at him as he passed, but he kept his strides even and purposeful.

He found her in the central room, the air thick with a sickly sweet yet spoilt smell that permeated even through his mask.

Ghilan'nain looked up from the long table filled with an assortment of dissected parts.

"You have heard," she said.

"I have," he confirmed.

She smiled, her eyes sparking. Strands of her hair had fallen out of her high bun. "I have *felt* it. The Everything. I used it to power a simple spell, and it was so clean, so pure, so *potent*." She let out a breathless noise of glee as she clasped her gloved, bloodstained hands to her chest. "It could turn everything we know on its head. Magic we never would have thought possible could become possible!"

She laughed, elated. Unease curled in his stomach.

"We could destroy barriers and boundaries and meaningless rules! Rules of the natural world — reversed, or even changed completely! We could tame the Beyond, perhaps even meld realms!"

"Meld realms?" he asked, a touch incredulous. "That would be chaos."

She raised her arms, beholding the perfect world of her vision. "That would be beautiful. A new world. A new order!"

His hands clenched by his sides. "It is well and good to push boundaries or even break them but breaking *everything* is also unideal."

Ghilan'nain paused, lowered her arms. She turned to him, her smile and elation gone, staring at him with dark, dark eyes. "You disagree?"

He said nothing.

She tilted her head. "I thought you of all people would understand."

"I know the merits of challenging established limitations, and the merit of understanding why some are in place."

Ghilan'nain said nothing, stared right at him, unblinking, her scrutiny so piercing that he feared she'd see he no longer had a vallaslin even though he had the illusion and his mask on. Lavellan resisted taking a step back.

"You have changed," she said.

So have you. "It's what I do."

"To what extent, I wonder?"

He met her stare, unwavering. "Farewell, ma Venuralas." He turned and walked away, the septic scent in the room burning the walls of his throat.

"Do not get in the way."

Lavellan stopped walking. He glanced back at her, and the silence dragged between them.

“You should get some sun and eat something,” said Lavellan. “Keep yourself healthy, at the very least.” He turned and walked away again, and this time, Ghilan’nain didn’t stop him.

Whoever that was, she was no longer his friend.

Chapter End Notes

Well there goes ghilly. And here I go again making up stuff from the lore that is DEFINITELY getting nuked in DA4 hahaha. the elf sandwich also makes another appearance but with a dash of Pain™

Ghilly: *makes creepy threatening statements*

Lavellan: sis go outside and touch some grass. photosynthesise or something, yikes

Compass of the heart

Chapter Notes

This chapter is pretty much 99% Dirthavellan. I promise this is also still a solavellan fic, it's just because we're in the past timeline 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *The El'amelan's fortress, Elvhenan* | 4000 FA |

As planned, Solas and his team disrupted the Evanuris' plans through minor acts of inconveniences. Dirthamen would obscure their identities and doctor any reports to lead the trail away from Solas, while Mythal would help cover for Dirthamen's efforts in turn.

It soon became apparent that chaos would have to be introduced. Lavellan had been uneasy, but the foundations needed a good rattle now, and so, the stirrings of the slave uprising began. Solas founded a group of rebels with two goals in mind — emancipate the slaves, and delay the Evanuris' plans in the process. As the common adage went: two birds, one stone.

Mythal and Dirthamen supplied and supported the group from the shadows while ensuring the Forgotten couldn't take advantage of the fighting. Lavellan often helped Solas plan and execute his operations.

Needless to say, it was exhausting.

Lavellan collapsed on the grass of the El'amelan's garden, staring at the passing clouds with a blank expression.

The Quincentennial was tomorrow.

He covered his face and groaned. What kind of bullshit would he have to deal with now? He was far too exhausted to tend to political machinations and he just wanted to...

Lavellan uncovered his face.

He just wanted to spend some time with Dirthamen. They'd been so busy that they hadn't gotten the chance to spend time together or talk about anything outside of work lately.

Robes fluttered in his periphery. Lavellan turned his head just as Asunara sat beside him, staring at the clouds. She numbered among those who'd removed their vallaslin.

"If you need a break," she said, "you need only ask. We can handle tomorrow's Quincentennial. Do something you would like for the night."

He frowned. "Are you certain?"

"Very."

He hesitated, but his exhaustion was undeniable. "Alright," he conceded, and she smiled.

Free time was a wild concept to him, yet here he was with it for the first time in centuries.

He could... do whatever he wanted?

Lavellan stared at his wall.

What did he even want to do? He wanted to...

I miss Dirthamen.

Lavellan blinked at the thought, fluttering like the ribbon of a kite, then he laughed to himself. He entered his eluvian and headed for Dirthamen's room, knocking at the wall at the end of the corridor. Dirthamen may be busy and away.

The door opened.

Busy but in his room, then. Lavellan entered and was met with the sight of Dirthamen scowling at his paperwork.

"I could do with good news right now," said Dirthamen.

"Is my arrival not good enough news for you?" he teased.

Dirthamen's scowl vanished in favour of a small smile. "You are right, I apologise. How remiss of me. Your arrival is the greatest news one could ever receive, my month is made."

"Only a month?"

"Greedy, aren't you?"

"I believe you used to call me hungry."

He tilted his head at Lavellan, his smile growing. "You still are."

Lavellan looked away with a soft scoff, ignoring the small kick of his heart. "You look exhausted," he said instead. "When was the last time you had a stroll outside? In the sun? Look at you, you're growing pale. You tan quickly, so this is telling me that you haven't spent much time outdoors."

"Perhaps I have been going when it is night."

"I somehow doubt it."

Dirthamen chuckled and stood from his desk, rubbing his eyes as he walked to his small table and poured himself a glass of water. "I do want to get away, but there isn't time. Tomorrow is also the Quincentennial." He frowned at Lavellan. "What's the issue now?"

Lavellan had no idea. Asunara had shooed him away from looking at the case and Faronel had even stood guard outside the archives to discourage Lavellan from sneaking in and peeking. He made a non-committal noise instead.

“Just leave it to the El’amelan,” said Lavellan. “You’re worrying about enough.”

He recalled the last Quincentennial and stopped himself from making a sour expression.

“Has Falon’Din given you a *gift* again?”

“I think he has given up on me.”

Lavellan laughed, hoping Dirthamen wouldn’t pick up on how relieved it sounded. “Impressive.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked, lips twitching, and drank his water, but his expression soon morphed into something hesitant. “Falon’Din wanted a balcony to himself, so I will be on my own.”

His brows raised. They had always been together for every Quincentennial. “Are you... alright with that?” Dirthamen without Falon’Din was a strange thought. Almost unnerving.

“Why not? I would not mind being away from him and escaping his nagging. I also do not want to sit there while he shoves his tongue down his attendant’s throat.” He set his glass down, gaze turning melancholy. “Besides, he has changed, and so have I. I cannot and will not force things to remain the same.”

“You aren’t alone,” Lavellan said softly. “I know you and Falon’Din have been drifting apart but... I’m sure he still loves you. And there are also other people here for you.”

“Thank you,” he murmured.

But Lavellan still didn’t want him to feel lonely.

An idea brewed in his head.

Lavellan made the arrangements and spoke to the necessary people.

They gave him the purple silks that the personal attendants wear.

The silks were loose and thin, more revealing than he recalled, and most of the fabric was translucent. It slid over his skin, almost threatening to slip off him.

“Is this an attire or decoration?” he muttered as he lined his eyes with kohl, applied powder and paint to his face. Just subtle touches. He’d never been comfortable with anything too striking. He was also planning to use his true face tonight, but he’d applied an illusion to make it look like a different face (with a vallaslin) to anyone other than Dirthamen.

He wore Dirthamen’s gifted earring, of course.

Dirthamen almost spilled his wine when he saw Lavellan.

“I brought oysters,” said Lavellan, smiling as he set the tray of food down. “It has the sauce you like. The wine should also compliment it.”

Dirthamen gaze flicked towards the earring, back to Lavellan’s face, then down the rest of him in swift appraisal. He then looked away and said nothing for a few seconds.

Lavellan raised a brow. Was that...?

“Is it not a risk, using your true face without the vallaslin?” Dirthamen asked. Lavellan deflated. Ah, he’d been shocked for other reasons.

“I’ve applied an illusion. You’re the only one who can see this face.”

“Is this pertaining to your job for the night?”

Lavellan turned so Dirthamen wouldn’t see his playful smile. “Maybe.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. Nonetheless, he still scanned the ballroom in the hopes of spotting one of the El’amelan, but nothing. Instead, his gaze fell on the balcony Falon’Din was on, grinning as he was being handfed by the attendant on his lap, and Lavellan was reminded of last Quincentennial once again. Lavellan pulled his lips in displeasure.

“What’s the matter?” asked Dirthamen, looking towards Lavellan’s line of sight. Lavellan forced himself to smile.

“Nothing.”

Dirthamen glanced at Falon’Din, then Lavellan. His look turned doubtful. “If there is any way I can help with your task for tonight, you just have to ask.”

A traitorous thought curled in Lavellan’s head.

He could... sit on Dirthamen’s lap.

No! That was— No. He mustn’t make jealousy-fuelled decisions.

Oh, but he so wanted to be selfish tonight.

While his mind battled itself, his mouth already moved and asked, “May I sit on your lap?”

Dirthamen paused mid-sip of his wine.

Ice washed over Lavellan. *Stupid—!*

After a careful, shallow sip, Dirthamen said, “Yes.”

That wasn’t the answer he’d been expecting. Lavellan reached towards the tray and snapped off a grape bunch so he’d have an excuse to turn away and hide his panicked look. He schooled his expression when he faced Dirthamen again.

Lavellan didn’t amble. He kept it as methodical as possible — hand on shoulder, swing leg over, sit on lap.

Their gazes met. Closer than Lavellan had anticipated. Dirthamen's eyes were beautiful and violet and Lavellan forgot how to breathe.

He hurriedly plucked a grape and held it up, the action catching Dirthamen's attention and breaking their eye contact.

"I know you hate being fed," started Lavellan, "so I thought of a solution."

Lavellan ate the grape himself.

Dirthamen's brows raised and Lavellan smiled as he chewed.

"Problem solved," Lavellan said after and plucked another grape.

Dirthamen chuckled. "Not quite. Though I do have a compromise."

Before Lavellan could ask, he held Lavellan's hand and guided it to his mouth. He ate the grape, lips brushing against Lavellan's fingers, and Lavellan stared, trying to swallow his heart back into his chest.

"Would you like an oyster?" Lavellan blurted out before he could get too flustered.

Dirthamen smiled as he set his glass down and rested a hand on Lavellan's hip. Its warmth seeped through the silk.

"That depends," said Dirthamen. "Are you going to eat it before I can?"

"I promise to behave."

"Do you now?" he asked, voice lowering. Or was Lavellan imagining things? He might be.

Lavellan reached for an oyster in answer and offered it to him. Dirthamen took it and tipped his head back as he ate it. Lavellan stared at the bared length of his neck.

He forced himself to look somewhere else.

Dirthamen hummed in contentment and placed the empty shell aside as he chewed.

"Nice?" asked Lavellan, grateful that his voice wasn't as dry as his mouth now seemed to be.

"Refreshing." He took another oyster and offered it to Lavellan. "Would you like some?"

Lavellan stared at it. The next course of action would have been to take it himself, but he dared to lean in and press his lips to the mouth of the shell instead. Dirthamen's hand on Lavellan's hip tightened for a fleeting moment before he tipped the shell forward and the meat slid into Lavellan's mouth.

It *did* taste nice and refreshing. He looked down and stared at the rich pattern of Dirthamen's robe, focusing on chewing, too aware of Dirthamen's gaze.

"Nice?" asked Dirthamen, an echo of Lavellan's earlier question.

Lavellan nodded, heartbeat echoing in his head, ears hot.

A loud bell tolled and Lavellan started.

“The ceremony is starting,” said Dirthamen.

Right. Ceremony. He got off Dirthamen’s lap with as much grace as he could, trying to remain casual and unbothered.

This was going to be a long night.

The ward fortification ceremony progressed without complication. During the feast after, Lavellan sat with the other attendants on the nearby table as the Evanuris dined together.

Falon’Din was the first to leave the feast, departing with his attendant, soon followed by Mythal and Elgar’nan. Sylaise and June were talking to one another, as were Ghilan’nain and Andruil. That left Dirthamen alone. He kept up an unmoved front, surveying the crowd, but Lavellan knew he was feeling morose.

Lavellan rose and approached. Dirthamen glanced at him.

He stopped at Dirthamen’s side and leaned in. “I’m bored,” he whispered into his ear. “Let’s leave.”

“You do know what this will look like, don’t you?” he murmured.

“Don’t make me haul you away. How would *that* look, hm?”

Dirthamen smiled. “You are making this night very difficult.” He stood and Lavellan bit back a grin.

They headed back in silence, ignoring the side-eyes that a few people they’d passed gave them. The servants were probably already talking.

Once within Dirthamen’s Crossroads and away from public scrutiny, Dirthamen dropped the stoic persona and shot Lavellan a small smile.

“Is your job finished?” asked Dirthamen.

Lavellan laughed sheepishly. “I suppose it constitutes as finished, considering I never started one?”

Dirthamen stopped walking and stared at him, tilting his head in confusion. “No plots during the Quincentennial? I find that difficult to believe.”

“If there is one, I wouldn’t know because Asunara made me take a break and refused to show me the files.” He kept walking and Dirthamen followed, quiet. Contemplative, but not upset.

They reached the eluvian to Dirthamen’s private quarters and entered his bedchamber. Lavellan raised his hand to light the crystals in the ceiling but Dirthamen placed his hand over Lavellan’s and stopped him. The door shut behind them. Their illumination came from Arlathan’s night lights streaming in through the large window.

“You were lying,” said Dirthamen, violet eyes gleaming in the faint light, “when you said being my attendant for the night pertained to your job.”

"I said maybe." Lavellan smiled in mischief. "It was no lie."

He paused, then chuckled. "Clever boy."

Lavellan's mind blanked at the praise but he swiftly recovered. "Or maybe you've gotten slow with age."

"You are older than me."

"My time in the Beyond doesn't count. Even if it does, that's even more embarrassing on your end. Someone older than you is showing you up."

"You are so difficult," he said with a soft laugh. He took his hand off Lavellan's and walked to his dresser, started taking his rings off. Lavellan walked up to him and gently grabbed his hands.

"Wait," Lavellan murmured and took the rings off for him.

Dirthamen frowned. "You do not have to actually attend to me."

"Humour me a bit more?" he asked, looking up at him.

He stared at Lavellan for a few beats, then nodded. "Very well," he said. "But only because I can never seem to say no to you."

"Is that so? You shouldn't have told me that. I'm going to exploit it."

"Don't you already?"

Lavellan flashed him a smile and didn't answer, focusing instead on slipping the rings off his fingers and placing them back inside the jewellery box. Neither of them said anything, basking in the dim and the quiet. Once he was done, Dirthamen finally spoke.

"Why are you doing this?"

I hate seeing you upset. "You grow wearier with each passing year. Everything around you is changing, and you are taking it with grace." He placed his hand over Dirthamen's chest. "But it still hurts."

Dirthamen lowered his gaze and averted it.

"I wanted to lift your spirits," Lavellan continued. "So... little acts of service. Easing the smaller burdens."

He looked back at Lavellan, the shadow of the large window's ornate frame slashing across an eye. "You are also burdened yourself. I should not be your responsibility."

"You are not my responsibility. I'm here because I want to be. I'm doing this because you're important to me." He smiled. "You care for and cherish those important to you."

Dirthamen stared.

Lavellan guided him to a chair and sat him down so he could start on undoing the arrangement of his hair.

"I know you're worried that the things I do for you are out of an ingrained sense of loyalty that I've learned from the empire," said Lavellan, pulling a lock of Dirthamen's hair out from its loop. "That

I submit to you because I worship you. But that's no longer true. I do this because I think you are an imperfect man trying to amend his mistakes and do the right thing. I'm loyal to you because I trust you."

His gaze softened as he pulled the last pin out and the rest of Dirthamen's hair fell.

"I'm doing this because I love you," Lavellan finished, the word standing for so much more, but he kept all of that locked tight within his chest.

Dirthamen bowed his head, some strands of his hair slipping over his shoulder. "The things you say..." he murmured.

"They're true." He placed the pins aside and grabbed a small mirror, about to lift the paint on his face with magic since his face was starting to itch.

Dirthamen grasped his hand again. Lavellan looked at him in question.

"Let me," said Dirthamen and stood, coaxing Lavellan to sit this time.

"I can just lift it with magic."

"Wait." Dirthamen retreated to his bathroom. Lavellan tilted his head but stayed put out of curiosity, waited until Dirthamen returned with a small bowl of water and a cloth. He knelt in front of Lavellan as he set the bowl down, his ceremonial robes pooling and wrinkling beneath him, but he didn't seem to care. Lavellan tried to stand. Why was he kneeling—

Dirthamen placed a hand on Lavellan's knee in placation. Lavellan hesitated, but he sat back. Dirthamen rolled his sleeves, dipped the cloth into the water and wrung it, the faint scent of something floral curling in the air.

"What's in the water?" asked Lavellan.

"Something to help lift the powder and paint."

He shifted again. "You don't have to."

"I want to." He looked up at Lavellan, serious. "May I?"

"I—" The air felt thin. "Why?"

"You care for and cherish those important to you," he repeated and smiled. "May I?"

He nodded, speechless.

Dirthamen held Lavellan's face, careful and light, but it wasn't the grip of somebody afraid something would break beneath their hand. It was the grip of somebody in wonder. Lavellan fell even further.

The cloth was warm as it passed over his eyelids, mindful as it swept along the edge to wipe the kohl away. Dirthamen's brows scrunched in concentration.

"Is my hand too heavy?" Dirthamen asked as he wiped Lavellan's cheek.

His eyes slipped shut, comforted by the motions. "Not at all."

It ended far too soon. Lavellan opened his eyes and watched Dirthamen drape the cloth over the

side of the bowl. He passed his hands over Lavellan's face, lifting the droplets of water and drying it, and placed the collected water in the bowl.

"Thank you," Lavellan murmured.

"It was my pleasure."

Lavellan expected him to rise, but he stayed kneeling, quiet, his gaze on the bowl of water as if there was an answer within its ripples.

"Promise me," Dirthamen said, "that you will not hesitate to oppose me if you think I am going down the wrong path."

"I promise," said Lavellan.

Dirthamen relaxed. "Thank you." He smiled at Lavellan, eyes glimmering. "Not just for that, but for trying to cheer me up tonight. I only regret that you had to sacrifice what little free time you already get."

It was Lavellan's turn to look away, the earring swaying in his periphery. "It can't be considered a sacrifice if it was motivated by selfishness."

"What do you mean?"

I mean I wanted you all to myself for the night.

"The past few years have been hectic and we're both being stretched thin," said Lavellan. "We haven't spoken like this in a while." He still couldn't meet Dirthamen's gaze. "I've missed you," he admitted softly.

It was quiet between them again. Then—

"I've missed you too," Dirthamen said and Lavellan's breath stuttered. "And I enjoyed tonight. I am happy we were able to spend time together like this again."

So was Lavellan, but there was still that hunger within him, craving more. Curse him and curse this hunger. He knew Dirthamen loved him in return, but he wasn't certain if the nature of that love was romantic. Lavellan should be content with what they had. This was already monumental.

This was already...

Be content, let this be enough. What they had was fine. It was well and good to change things, but there was always a limit to things. Some things had to remain the same.

...But he could make the most of his time now, while he could still fool himself.

When Dirthamen stood, Lavellan stood with him and reached for the edge of Dirthamen's sash. "May I?" he asked Dirthamen. "Help you disrobe, I mean. Just to the final layer."

Dirthamen paused. Lavellan's heart gripped his ribs, the bones creaking from the strain.

"Yes," Dirthamen answered.

Lavellan released a soft, surprised breath. With slow and gentle fingers, he pulled at Dirthamen's sash and undid it, and Dirthamen's outer robe fell open. Lavellan draped the sash over the back of the seat. He gripped the robe and pulled it back, Dirthamen slipping his arm out of the sleeves, and

Lavellan draped that over the chair too.

Layer by layer, he peeled Dirthamen's robes off, delicate and attentive, trying to hide the tremor of his hands, until Dirthamen was down to the final layer. Just a plain, loose shift, and trousers.

"All done," he said and smiled, stepping back. He had to go. Before he asked for anything else that he'd regret. "Thank you for entertaining my requests. I'll stop pestering you now. You must be tired." He turned—

Dirthamen grabbed his wrist.

Lavellan stopped, looked back at him.

He stared at Lavellan with an unidentifiable expression, looking as if there were words building behind his lips that couldn't escape.

"What's wrong?" Lavellan asked.

His grip tightened imperceptibly, but he let go and looked away. "It is nothing. Goodnight."

Lavellan frowned. "Clearly not. What is it? You can tell me anything."

"Anything," he said with a light breath of laughter. Dirthamen's gaze flicked towards him. "Can I really?"

"Of course."

"You say that with such conviction. What if I told you that I always long for your company?"

"I'd say the same."

"If I told you that I feel as if I can accomplish anything so long as you are beside me?"

Lavellan paused, searched for an answer, but Dirthamen continued.

"What if I told you that I always feel undone when I am in your presence? That your words echo in my mind for weeks? Would you feel that same conviction?"

"What?" he asked, voice feeble.

"What if I told you that I think of your smile and laughter when I am tired to keep me going? That I feel the ghost of your touch for hours?" Dirthamen took a step closer, gaze intent. "That in the mornings I wonder what it would be like to wake up beside you? That just the sight of you brings light to my day? That my heart aches whenever we part ways?"

Lavellan's eyes steadily widened with each declaration, each breath he was taking in shallower than the last.

Dirthamen laughed dryly and ran his hand through his hair, a pained light in his eyes. "I should not have harboured such sentiments, and I should not have said such things, but the heart never listens." Dirthamen turned away. "I am not worthy or deserving of your time." What— "And now I have burdened you with this. I apologise for my poor self-control this evening—"

Lavellan crossed the distance with a step and held Dirthamen's cheek, turned his face so that their eyes could meet.

"Wait," said Lavellan, breathless, something terrible and hopeful building in his heart. Dirthamen waited, but he averted his gaze, as if shamed. No, that wouldn't do. "I have something to ask of you."

Dirthamen's pained expression melted into one of fond resignation.

"For you," said Dirthamen, "anything."

Lavellan's heart thundered, fighting against the pressure already in his chest.

"Stop me if I get too hungry."

Lavellan pulled him down and kissed him.

Dirthamen drew in a sharp intake of breath. Lavellan didn't attempt to do anything else, didn't move, just closed his eyes and kept his lips pressed against Dirthamen's for a few heartbeats, memorising all he could in that short span of time — the softness of Dirthamen's lips against his, the warmth of his cheek beneath Lavellan's hand, the tips of his fingers brushing against the strands of Dirthamen's hair.

Lavellan pulled back, his hands trembling — all of him trembling — and looked up at Dirthamen.

He stared at Lavellan, eyes wide, lips parted.

Then, he tugged Lavellan closer by the silk and descended upon him with another, more ravenous kiss, hands finding their way to Lavellan's hair and pulling to tilt his head up further. Lavellan made a muffled sound. The relief and nigh delirious joy unfurled in his chest.

Hands roamed and grabbed at one another. Someone deepened the kiss.

Dirthamen gripped him by the hips and backed him into the wall. Lavellan gasped as the cold surface touched the bare parts of his back, the silk slipping over his shoulders like liquid.

"Lavellan," Dirthamen breathed like a prayer, bit and sucked down the length of Lavellan's neck, lips sweeping over his collarbones in veneration. Lavellan exhaled shakily, thoughts halfway to gone, feverish and dizzy, burning beneath Dirthamen's touch. His mind and emotions were all in a disarray. He couldn't muster a single, coherent thought besides all the different ways he knew how to say, *Yes*.

He tugged at Dirthamen's hair and pulled him back up, kissed him again.

This couldn't be real. This was— It couldn't be real.

But the heat in his body and the slight sting of the marks that Dirthamen had left on his neck were real.

Dirthamen's fingers tangled and pulled in his hair again. Lavellan groaned.

This was real.

The tight coil of emotions Lavellan had kept locked in his chest unravelled. He broke the kiss to keep his tight grip on it and catch his breath, hating the sudden cold that rushed in between them.

"Look at you," Dirthamen said in awe. He cupped Lavellan's cheek and Lavellan all but melted against him.

The emotions in Lavellan's chest didn't stop flooding in, straining against the boundaries of the limited space. He couldn't focus or regulate them.

He wanted—

He wanted.

Dirthamen kissed him again, and Lavellan greedily drank in the rush of warmth.

The coil unravelled further. Lavellan couldn't reel it in.

"Dirthamen," he gasped.

It snapped.

He lost control of his aura and it burst, liquid and leaking through the cracks of his grip. Everything within his heart, now out.

No— Not this. Not the broken pieces of him—

"It's alright," Dirthamen murmured, their lips brushing as he spoke. "They are not broken, and neither are you."

Lavellan hid his face into the crook of Dirthamen's neck, the metal of Lavellan's earring cool against his flushed skin.

Such a barrage would have overwhelmed anyone, but Dirthamen weathered it without a noise of complaint. All of Lavellan's love, he accepted.

And once the silence began to ring louder than the drumming of Lavellan's heart in his ears, Dirthamen revealed his aura. That aura that always remained hidden, locked just as tight as Lavellan's.

It was heavy and thick and Lavellan breathed in its intensity, felt the conflicted mess of wanting and wishing and wondering, the overwhelming awareness of their imbalance, the attempts to fix it. Felt the sleepless nights, aching in his chest, burst of warmth, drape of fondness, guilt and guilt joy. Even the darker thoughts, kept at the very back. Heated touches in the dark; bruising grips.

And most of all, Dirthamen's love — prevalent and undeniable. Love, in all senses of the word.

Lavellan raised his head, staring up at Dirthamen with disbelief and relief in equal measure. All the rampant emotions in the air were both elating and overwhelming, but neither of them could stop it. The seal that had broken would take a while to rebuild. They would have to reseal everything again because they couldn't afford for the world to see them bare, but the world would have to wait for now.

"How long?" asked Lavellan.

"Far too long." His fingers grazed down Lavellan's cheek, trailed along his jaw, rested beneath his chin, and tipped it up. "Far, *far* too long. And you—" his other hand gripped the silk draped over Lavellan's chest as if condemning it— "did not help."

"I'm sorry?" he asked, on the verge of teasing.

"Are you?"

Lavellan bit his lip and smiled, lowered his gaze. "Maybe not."

Dirthamen let go of the silk and rested his hand on Lavellan's hip instead. "Well, isn't that a problem? I thought you promised to behave."

"I did, didn't I?" He snaked his arms around Dirthamen's neck and pressed themselves closer. Dirthamen's gaze dropped to Lavellan's lips. "Alright," he whispered in the scant space between them. "I'll be good. Shall I show you how sincerely sorry I am?"

Without breaking eye contact, Lavellan lowered himself onto his knees.

Lavellan woke slowly, feeling warm and secure. And maybe too warm now.

Dirthamen had his arm wrapped around Lavellan, their combined body heat beneath the blankets becoming a furnace. Lavellan squirmed, then grimaced at the aches in his body.

He squirmed again. Dirthamen grunted and tightened his hold, Lavellan's face being pressed into his chest.

"Let go. I'm burning," Lavellan said, voice muffled.

"I believe my curtain suffered that fate," he mumbled, eyes still closed.

His ears heated. "I didn't mean to set it on fire."

"I'll take it as a compliment."

Lavellan snorted, but his exasperation didn't last long. He shuffled so he could wrap his arms around Dirthamen as well and tilted his head up to look at him.

Dirthamen opened his eyes and smiled at him. "Hi."

"Hi," Lavellan said, smiling back. "I don't want to move."

"Don't want to or unable to?"

"Both. Merciless, you."

Dirthamen's smile turned smug. "You asked for it."

"You fiend," said Lavellan, laughing. Dirthamen soothed him by running his fingers through Lavellan's hair. Lavellan's eyes dipped. "I suppose the rumours have some merit now."

"Will that be a problem?"

Lavellan scoffed. "What are they going to do about it? Get scandalised? I'll terrorise them." As if they'd find out in the first place. When the God of Secrets and the Ras'virelan wanted something hidden, it would stay hidden.

"My little menace," Dirthamen said, still smiling. Lavellan could hardly blame him. He was still smiling, too.

He rested his hand on Dirthamen's cheek. "Your little menace," he murmured.

Dirthamen held Lavellan's hand and turned his head, pressed his lips to Lavellan's wrist. "The compass of my heart."

Lavellan kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

~~Kneel to put the amen in Dirthamen--~~

They're idiots, your honour.

Is this my attempt to distract you from the fact that we only have 3 chapters left of Elvhenan?

No! Why would I do that? Anyway, look, they're happy! :D

No update next Monday because I've got stuff due and they've been building up coz I've been procrastinating and putting them off *wheeze*

The boundaries of change

Chapter Notes

"No update next monday"

Well yes, but no. I dropped a subject to preserve my sanity and so my weekend was freed up.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 4087 FA |

Lavellan sat on the roof near one of the palace gardens and read. This was one of his favourite gardens in the palace. Not many people would pass through these gardens since it was far from the main hub of activity, it offered a beautiful view, and it was accessible if he climbed out of the window in Dirthamen's music room. And if he ever heard the start of Dirthamen's music, he could make his way over and climb back in through the window.

He'd gotten a few exasperated looks from Dirthamen for it.

Today though, another person walked through the garden.

Mythal.

Lavellan stared at her as she walked past, didn't move from the roof.

She stopped.

"Isha'belsal'in," she greeted and looked up at him.

Lavellan closed his book and jumped down in front of her. He bowed. "Ma Venuralas."

He didn't kneel.

She turned. "Walk with me."

"How did you recognise me?" he asked as he walked beside her.

"I guessed," she said, tone airy in a way that was telling of either levity or ambiguity. "What were you reading?"

"Lathanir."

She hummed. "Died too young. A shame. Never got to see her thousandth year."

"Those who challenge preconceived notions always invite danger. Even more so if they are successful."

Still, he and Solas had been saddened by her passing.

“Not many enjoy change,” said Mythal.

Lavellan side-eyed her but again, said nothing. Silence seemed to be the safest option with Mythal.

“You need not be so wary,” she said. “And you need not keep your vallaslin on. Nobody will know who it is I walk with anyway. The advantage of being the many-faced man.”

“That sounds like a trap.”

She laughed. “It does, doesn’t it? But I am being sincere. Come, let us converse person to person.”

Lavellan smiled. Person to person, she said, but it wasn’t as if he could refuse her. He wouldn’t dare to say no outright. Her words were just as illusory as the spell he used for his vallaslin. Nevertheless, he took it down.

“Who told you I’d removed my vallaslin?” he asked.

“Nobody. You simply carried yourself higher.”

Lavellan, again, said nothing.

“You’ve always detested me,” said Mythal, but she didn’t look or sound upset and her aura remained tranquil.

“Detest? A strong word. And untrue.”

“Then would you care to share the word that is true?”

Lavellan brushed his fingers against a peony that they passed. “It is not my place to cast judgement upon you.”

“Ah, it’s a judgement, is it?”

Talking to Mythal was like walking straight into a corner at every turn. One had to wonder how many corners a path could possibly have.

She chuckled at his silence.

“Allow me to pose to you a common ethical dilemma,” she said. “The drowning question.”

He frowned. “I hate that question.”

“You are standing on an endless wall over the ocean,” she said regardless, “To one side, a loved one is drowning. To the other side, four strangers are drowning. You have a boat, but you can only toss it over one side of the wall. Who do you give the boat to?”

He made a displeased face.

“No, let me make this clearer. Dirthamen is drowning on one side. Four innocent civilians are drowning on the other. Who do you choose?”

Lavellan looked at her but she kept her gaze ahead, disposition still placid.

“Are you asking me because you want to know my answer or because you want to know your

answer?" he asked. "The many for the few, or the one you love above all else?"

It was Mythal's turn to not answer. Again, her aura betrayed nothing.

A person who could hide their aura was frightening. A person who could still show it yet have such an impressive control over their internal state?

Dangerous.

"Perhaps both," she answered.

"You'd be better off asking someone like Solas. You're asking the wrong person."

"Am I? You and I, we both must keep in mind the state of the empire. I am not blind to your contributions. I know the extent of your efforts to keep the peace and maintain stability." She paused. "Or disturb it. You have a hand on the wheel steering this vessel."

Mythal stopped walking and stared at something to the side. Lavellan glanced at what had caught her attention. A spiderweb.

"The empire is a network of threads, you could say," she said.

"Then who's the spider?"

She smiled. "The empire as well."

"I propose an amendment."

Mythal tipped her head.

"The spider represents those in power," he said. "The web: everyone else. The spider requires the web intact so that it may feed, so that it may stay sated in the middle. But that is all the web is to it. A means to an end. A few broken threads mean nothing, negligible, repairable."

She stared at the web in thought. "A few broken threads mean nothing? It would depend on the thread. Cut any anchoring threads hard enough—" she raised two glowing fingers and sliced at a thread— "and the force of its recoil may just break other vital threads. And the web collapses."

True enough, the recoil of the thread she'd cut pulled at another anchoring thread and broke it. Half of the web collapsed.

Mythal hummed. Lavellan frowned at it.

"The spider may come repair it again," she said, "but the damage has been done." She faced him. "Which are you, Isha'belsal'in? Thread or spider?"

"I have no real power. Not in a way that matters."

"Then do you know which thread you are?"

He said nothing.

Her golden eyes gleamed. "A fair answer. I do not know myself. Well, I suppose I've taken up enough of your time. Take care. Enjoy your book."

He nodded. "Farewell, ma Venuralas."

A breeze whispered past, carrying with it the curl of notes. Lavellan looked up. Dirthamen was playing again.

“It has been a while since we’ve been invited to hear his music,” said Mythal and turned to walk away. “I hear it more often when I pass through this garden.”

“You could stay and listen.”

“It is not meant for me.” She smiled at him over her shoulder. “Go on.”

And off she went.

Lavellan watched her go.

| *Arlathan, Elvhenan* | 4090 FA |

“What are you doing?” asked Dirthamen from his bed, propped up on his elbow and watching Lavellan with amusement.

“I lost the clutch for my earring,” Lavellan muttered, looking under Dirthamen’s bed and squinting. His face brightened as the small metal caught the light of the sunrise diffusing through the window. “There!” He grabbed it and sat on the bed, rolling the clutch between his fingers. “It must have fallen when I took it off.”

Lavellan cast a linking and locational spell on the clutch and earring.

“There,” said Lavellan.

“What did you do?”

“Next time I lose it, I just need to feed the earring a bit of magical energy and it’ll glow when pointed at the clutch.”

It wouldn’t normally be a problem if the earring stayed in his jewellery box, but he’d been carrying it in his inner pockets. A keepsake of sorts. Last thing he wanted was to lose it.

He reunited the clutch and earring, set them down on the nightstand, and joined Dirthamen in bed. Dirthamen held him close as he settled against his side.

“You woke me up for this,” Dirthamen muttered.

“It was an emergency.”

Dirthamen smiled despite his irritated front. Lavellan closed his eyes again, ready to return to sleep, comforted and lulled by the warmth and Dirthamen’s steady breaths.

He was almost there when Dirthamen asked, “How do you feel about ascending?”

“Pass,” answered Lavellan without hesitation and wrapped his arms tighter around Dirthamen, leeching off his body heat. Dirthamen pulled the sheets up higher.

“I thought that would be your answer.”

“If people begin to worship me, I fear something will explode. For everyone’s wellbeing and mine,

let's hope the day never arrives." Besides, the thought of all those eyes following his every move, expectant, hoping... Lavellan already knew he would shoulder too much. "I am content being unseen."

"I cannot be blamed for wishing to show the world how wonderful you are, can I?"

Lavellan snorted and opened his eyes, looking up at him with a roguish grin. "Fucking me on your throne will get you similar results."

Dirthamen paused in thought.

"I was kidding!" cried Lavellan.

| ???, *Elvhenan* | 4098 FA |

Lavellan flew over the desert, searching for areas that Solas' forces could use as a temporary shelter for their next operation. Near an oasis, preferably.

It was hours later when he found one. He landed and shifted back, drank and splashed himself with water, and collapsed beneath the shade of one of the trees. Lavellan sighed in relief. Maybe he could nap here for a while.

He wiped away the sweat that had gathered at his hairline and squinted up at the cloudless sky.

Something large flew overhead, blocked the sunlight for a split second.

Lavellan sat up and craned his neck. Was that... a dragon?

Wait, he knew that dragon. Lavellan shifted back into a raven and flew up, watching the dragon fly away, scrutinising its distant form.

No dragon could fly that fast. Only—

Mythal.

Lavellan followed. What was she doing here? She had no temple here. There were no temples here, in general. Not in this part of the desert, not this far west.

He flew after her, made sure to remain out of sight. She continued west, soaring beneath the scorching sun, until she reached the rocky canyons bordering the desert. Upon reaching them, she dove into a gorge, shifting back into an elf as she reached the bottom. Lavellan followed.

It was dim and cool within the gorge, as if even the heat dared not touch the place. It would have been a relieving change if not for the wave of unease that rippled down his back.

What was Mythal doing here?

Once he spotted her again, he made sure to stay out of sight and cast a muffling spell around himself so that the sound of flapping wings wouldn't give him away.

She was carrying a scroll as she walked through the gorge. Eventually, she stopped and faced the rock face.

Then she walked through it.

Lavellan flew to it and shifted back into an elf. He scanned the ambient magic around it with a frown. It wasn't a hidden eluvian. Just a hidden passage. No security around it either, no warning spells. Then again, nobody ever entered these canyons since there were numerous tales surrounding it, more unflattering and repellent than not.

He pressed his hand to the rock face. His fingers passed through.

He stepped in and entered a tunnel.

Lavellan shifted into a spider and skittered along the walls, catching up to Mythal. The tunnel led to a large chasm. Just... a chasm. There was nothing there.

But Mythal walked over the chasm without stopping, never once falling. Lavellan crawled to the edge and cautiously placed one of his legs over. It hit something solid. Invisible bridge. He took a risk and raced after Mythal, attached himself to the edge of her robe and made his way up. Just enough to avoid being trampled on.

Halfway through, they passed an invisible barrier, the magic of it spraying over him. And in the middle of the chasm there appeared a floating tower of stone, all sharp lines and severe cuts. It wasn't made to be appealing; it was made to be functional.

What was this place? It'd been masked. What for?

The grand door at the entrance opened with a push — no magic circles, no locks. Nothing. He supposed that even if someone were to find the hidden entrance to the tunnel, the large chasm would deter them.

Mythal walked into the tower.

The door closed, flooded them with darkness, but with a wave of Mythal's hand, the crystals embedded into the floor and walls glowed, revealed shelves around them that stretched up and up and up to the very top of the tower.

It was a library.

Mythal stopped in the middle of the tower where a large table stood on an elevated platform. Lavellan disengaged from her robe and climbed one of the nearby shelves instead, watching her.

She paused.

Lavellan moved over the dark spine of a book to blend in and stayed still.

She looked around her, golden eyes keen, but she returned to what she was doing. Lavellan didn't relax.

Mythal reached for the table's centrepiece — a small, metal sculpture of a dragon skull. She grabbed its horns, twisted them, then pulled. The dragon skull lifted and revealed a hidden compartment. Mythal took the scroll cylinder resting within it, removed the scroll inside, and replaced it with the scroll she'd carried here. She returned the cylinder with the swapped scroll and placed the dragon skull back over the compartment.

As for the scroll now in her hands...

She burned it.

And she left.

Lavellan waited. And waited.

Once he was sure she was gone, he shifted back into an elf and frowned at the dragon skull. He scanned it in case it had any alarms or defensive spells, but again, nothing.

Why did she burn the other scroll? Why did she swap them?

He mimicked her earlier actions, twisted and pulled the horns, lifted the skull, and took out the silver, decorated cylinder inside the compartment. The scroll inside fell into his waiting hands and he unrolled it over the table.

It was a spell.

He studied the scroll, eyes growing wide with horror the more he read and understood.

What was she— Where did she find this?

No, that wasn't the right question. This scroll was bathed in her ambient magic, an author's signature in a way, so this was a spell she'd created.

Was this what she'd been working on? Was this her plan, her solution?

This was no solution! This couldn't be. Why would she?

Lavellan's frantic eyes read over the information.

Seals... eight powerful souls...

Nine Evanuris. Minus Mythal.

Eight.

No, it couldn't be.

His eye caught another phrase.

All eight intended seals must be accessing their foci at the time of casting.

No, that was not a coincidence then. The eight powerful souls were in clear reference to the Evanuris, minus one, maybe herself. His throat tightened. *Solas and Dirthamen—*

She was planning to use them all to seal the poison. Maybe even planning to trick them into using their foci at the same time so that she could cast this spell.

“The many for the few, or the one you love above all else?”

She hadn't known the answer to his question then.

Now, this was her answer.

He put everything back in order, shifting back into a raven and storming out of that place, flying back out.

The desert sun was almost blinding, but the heat of it matched the rage in him.

He didn't know who to come to with the information, but Solas and Dirthamen had to know.

Lavellan hesitated.

But Mythal was important to them. How would they take it?

Maybe Solas first. Or Dirthamen? Who was able to be more level-headed about this? Dirthamen? But Dirthamen had a bad habit of being irrational when it came to decisions regarding his family. And Solas had mellowed since his youth, more Wisdom than Pride these days. He would understand, wouldn't he?

He'd consult with Solas first. Solas usually had good advice.

Lavellan met with Solas in the sanctuary and told him.

His words were like heavy blocks, sinking down the thick waters of silence that had engulfed them.

Solas took a breath. "This could be an attempt to frame her."

Lavellan swallowed the bitterness in his throat. "I saw her myself, Solas."

"There is no guarantee that the spell is what you think it is."

"What else could eight powerful souls mean?"

"Easily anything."

"With the mention of the *foci*?"

Solas turned away from Lavellan and walked to the window and something heavy sat in Lavellan's gut at the sight of his back, but he persevered.

"Solas, I know it's hard to—"

"Moreover," he interrupted, "she may not even be planning to use this binding spell. Perhaps she is putting it away for safekeeping. You do not know her true intentions."

"Neither do you," he fired back.

"I know you have your reservations about Mythal—"

"This isn't about my personal feelings about her."

Solas glanced back at him and the sharp severity of his gaze took Lavellan aback. "Is it not? You have jumped to the conclusion that her actions are malicious."

"Well," he said, the bitterness seeping up the walls of his throat and coating his tongue, "if we're going to bring personal feelings into this, don't you think you're too forgiving of her? You excuse so many of her choices. She *twisted* you, made you fight instead of advise—"

“She required wisdom on the battlefield. Unorthodox it may be, but it was necessary.”

“Necessary.” He laughed. “*Necessary?*”

“Had I not seen firsthand the struggles that the slaves and soldiers face, had I not experienced them myself, I may have never understood what it is I fight for now.”

“What, your suffering was necessary so that you could understand? Are you hearing yourself?” Lavellan took a step towards him, hands spread out in imploration. “One day, when she chooses the world over her family, over you, are you going to lie down and take it? Will you believe that suffering necessary still?”

Solas' expression hardened. “For the sake of many? Yes. I trust her decisions, and I know she would not have made them easily. You do not know her as I do.”

“Blind devotion does no one good.”

His eyes darkened, aura turning frigid. “You wear the trappings of hypocrisy well.”

Heat prickled at the back of Lavellan's neck. “I meant that for myself too. I do not blindly follow Dirthamen anymore. He makes mistakes and bad decisions and I call him out on them. But you? You would not dare raise a hand against Mythal, you absolute *coward*.”

Solas' aura flared but his eyes remained steely. “This discussion is over.”

“No,” he said and stood his ground. “It is not. She devised that spell herself. That scroll was dripping with her magic. Why else would she need to devise a spell like that?”

“And as I said, it could be any number of reasons! Must you assume the worst of her?”

“Better than blindly defending her!”

He faced Lavellan fully, his scowl as dark as the worst thunderstorm. “Says the man who would gladly bury a blade in his heart for his god.”

“I'd bury a blade in my heart for *you*, too!” he snapped and Solas' glare faded from his shock. Lavellan's shoulders shook, hands trembling by his sides. “Coming to you was a mistake.”

Lavellan spun on his heel and walked away, angered and stinging.

Solas' unwillingness to listen hurt Lavellan more than he'd like to admit, and his steps were weighed with dread as he knocked at the door of the hidden corridor to Dirthamen's room. If Solas wouldn't listen, what the hell were the odds of Dirthamen doing the opposite? Dirthamen who still dearly loved his family even if he disliked the path they were on.

How far did that love run? How much could it tolerate?

The door opened and Lavellan entered.

Dirthamen was at his desk. He smiled at Lavellan, soft and warm and loving, but Lavellan was wearing a heavy mantle of rejection and growing despair that Dirthamen could sense. His smile

vanished.

Maybe Solas had a point. Was Lavellan really jumping to conclusions?

“What’s wrong?” asked Dirthamen, already standing and approaching.

“What’s west of the western desert?” Lavellan asked softly.

Dirthamen stopped in front of him, tilting his head. “The canyons?”

“Do you know of any hidden structures within the canyons?”

He frowned. “I... don’t believe so. Why?”

Lavellan’s lips felt as if they’d been stitched, but he forced them open, skin tearing and splitting, and he talked. Of Mythal, of the scroll and the spell, the disagreement with Solas.

He watched Dirthamen’s reaction after. Dirthamen’s expression stayed neutral, and not for the first time, Lavellan cursed his lover’s inscrutability.

“Just because she devised it does not mean she will use it,” said Dirthamen, tone free of reproach. It almost sounded placating.

But Lavellan had such a terrible feeling in his stomach.

“Then why did she make it?” asked Lavellan. “Eight powerful souls is a little too specific. Even more so with the mention of the foci.”

Dirthamen said nothing.

Then he turned away.

Panic coiled tight within Lavellan’s chest, but he tried to breathe through it.

“She wouldn’t use it,” said Dirthamen. “Solas may be right. Perhaps she merely meant to keep it safe.”

“Or you both may be wrong.”

“Lavellan,” he said, and this time, there was a warning within it. *Stop pushing*, it said.

But Lavellan had always pushed.

“Whatever the real answer is, we can’t just brush this aside either,” Lavellan said.

“You are asking me to believe— This is not an easy thing you ask for.”

Of course this wouldn’t be an easy thing to ask for. Out of all his siblings, Dirthamen was the closest to Mythal, and even though parents weren’t supposed to have favourites, Lavellan knew Mythal had always liked Dirthamen the most.

“I know it’s not but just...” He took a step closer to Dirthamen, reaching out. “But I’m just asking you to consider it.”

“Based on your word alone?” he shot back.

Lavellan’s hand paused mid-air. Something cold slithered in and twined with the coil of panic in

his chest. "My word?" he repeated, that coldness bleeding into his tone, and he drew his hand back. "Is my word not enough?"

Dirthamen hung his head with a sigh and he rubbed his eyes. But he still didn't face Lavellan. "You know that's not what I meant."

It was Lavellan's word against Mythal's. When had he ever stood a chance against her? Of course his word wouldn't be enough.

"I could talk to her about it," said Dirthamen.

"No!" The panic in his chest clawed up his throat. "That would just give her the time to cover up her tracks."

"You are asking me to consider but, in your heart, she is already implicated." He faced Lavellan. His expression was impassive, but his gaze was hard and fierce. "She was the one who taught me about the importance of family. She has *always* held our best interests at heart. She has always looked after her family, after us, her whole life. Why would she turn and betray the very pillars of her principles?"

"The entire empire is her family!" he countered. "She is the *All-Mother*. And you know she falls back on a utilitarian mindset when she's cornered! Trade the few for many. You think she wouldn't trade the Evanuris for the whole of the empire when pushed? When it's the People against the People, who do you choose then? Well she chooses the path with more benefit, regardless of her attachments."

It was silent for a few, crushing seconds.

"Take some time to cool down," was what Dirthamen said, his voice fringed with barely held back anger. Lavellan had long been acquainted with that tone of voice, but rarely had it ever been aimed at him. That sick feeling in his chest grew.

"You always do this," Lavellan said through gritted teeth. "You're so afraid of arguing with your family, with me, so you walk away. You'll have to stand your ground one day. You can't keep covering your ears."

His gaze sharpened. "And you so love toeing lines without regard for who you're trampling on."

The atmosphere turned icy.

Lavellan clenched his fists to hide how they were trembling. "Fine," he spat. "I'll get that scroll. Maybe you'll listen to me then."

"I am terribly sorry if I'm not willing to immediately believe the worst of my mother! Will you not even give me time to consider this? Are you so unwilling to grant my mother the benefit of the doubt?"

Lavellan looked away, tension wringing tight around his chest, around his head, gathering on his shoulders and back. Dirthamen turned again and walked away since he was such a savant at it. Lavellan stared at his retreating back.

"We'll talk when we're both level-headed," said Dirthamen. "Do not act on impulse either."

Lavellan spun on his heel and left without another word.

Some rational part of him knew that Dirthamen's words were sound and held truth, that he should heed them. But Lavellan couldn't shake this foreboding feeling off. It could be paranoid of him, and maybe his personal feelings towards Mythal *were* playing a large part in it, but the personal feelings were there for a reason. Centuries of watching how she governed, how she made her choices, had instilled this in him.

And he still couldn't forgive her for what she'd done to Solas.

Besides, his paranoia had saved his life on innumerable occasions. Better paranoid than dead.

He needed to get that scroll. He wasn't going to let her touch Dirthamen or Solas.

Over his dead body.

Chapter End Notes

Dirthamen: wanna be an evanuris?

Lavellan: no offense but your job sucks ass

Dirthamen: that's fair

"If people begin to worship me, I fear something will explode." *nervous laughter*

Boy have I got news for you.

Breaking bonds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

| ???, *Elvhenan* | 4098 FA |

It took some time, but Lavellan managed to find that strange tower within the canyons again. He scoured the area at least three times in search of any security measures because he doubted that a place like this wouldn't have any, but nothing.

How strange. Nevertheless, he kept his guard up.

He entered the tower and reached the table, grabbed the dragon skull's horns.

Twist, pull.

He lifted the skull and reached into the hidden compartment, taking out the cylinder and opening it. The scroll slid into his hands and he unrolled it, just to make sure it was the correct one.

Lavellan froze.

It was different. The scroll was now detailing the process of creating a focus.

"Did she swap it again?" he muttered beneath his breath. Where was the old scroll?

Lavellan inspected the surface of the scroll and the cylinder. Besides being steeped in Mythal's ambient magic, there was nothing else.

Unless...

He scrutinised the surface of the scroll, and indeed, upon further inspection, he was able to discern the faint shimmer over the surface. An illusion. But how could he undo it? His hand glowed gold as he ran it over the contents, checking for any weak areas, but the illusion was flawless and uniform. As expected of an Evanuris. Only another Evanuris could undo it.

He rerolled the scroll and pursed his lips. He had to bring this to Dirthamen.

Lavellan hesitated.

Would there be a point? Would Dirthamen listen?

He sighed. A problem for later. He had to get out for now, but he also had to make sure that no alarms would be triggered by walking out with the—

A whistle cut through the air.

Lavellan ducked. An arrow zipped over his head and embedded itself into the shelves behind him.

Shit.

He took the scroll, lifted his mask over his face and pulled his hood up, then slipped into the shadows of the room to hide within them.

Footsteps came running in. Clank of armour. Five people, maybe six, judging by the number of steps.

“Show yourself!” barked an imperious voice.

The owner of the voice was a man in armour, the crest of the Arlathanian Guard glittering on the clasp of his cloak. Lord-General Darmi’el, the leader of the Arlathanian Guard, Solas’ replacement after his defection. Lavellan had built a positive relationship with the man so unless he could get out of here, he could kiss that alliance goodbye. The other four with Darmi’el were also soldiers. The domineering combination of their auras signalled their strength.

How had they been alerted?

One of the soldiers glanced right at Lavellan and took out a shimmering, silver whip. She cracked it at him. Lavellan dodged, manipulating the shadows to keep himself hidden.

“You are trespassing upon the private archives of Our Most Venerable, the All-Father and Everlasting Flame, Lord Elgar’nan,” said Darmi’el and gestured for his soldiers to search.

Elgar’nan? This tower was *his*?

Lavellan skulked around, studying his opponents, weighing his options.

Darmi’el had the infamous sword, *Nas’danelan*, hanging on his hip. Soul-breaker. That sword had broken innumerable weapons on the battlefield, and a warrior’s weapon was their soul and will. Watching it break into pieces right before their eyes in the middle of a fight would be a blow to their will to fight.

Lavellan gripped the hilt of his daggers. His daggers were crafted by the El’amelan’s smith, and she had apprenticed under June, but *Nas’danelan* was crafted by June himself. If Lavellan met Darmi’el head-on, it would also be a battle between their weapons’ makers. Lavellan had utmost faith in his smith, but June was peerless in his domain.

And had it just been Darmi’el alone, then Lavellan may have had a chance at victory. But he had four other elite soldiers with him.

“Don’t think of escaping. There are a row of archers waiting outside for you.”

If they could catch Lavellan, that was.

He tried to shapeshift into a bird. Not a raven, that would be too obvious.

But his magic didn’t respond.

What—

The shadows he’d wrapped around himself were falling too. He backed away into the darker parts of the room, wary of the soldiers weaving in between the shelves.

“And we’ve placed magic-suppressing runes around the perimeter,” said Darmi’el. “You cannot hide for long.”

Lavellan assessed his avenues of escape. If it was just around the perimeter, he could shapeshift once he was outside. But how could he incapacitate them without magic? He couldn’t change faces either. At least the illusion of his vallaslin was running on Solas’ reservoir.

He had to make a run for it.

Lavellan took out a few cylinders from the shelves and threw them at an area away from him. The soldiers rushed towards the sound.

He determined the most unguarded route to the entrance.

And bolted.

Silver flashed in his periphery. Lavellan dodged the whip but it curved and followed him.

Another arrow whistled towards him again.

Lavellan swerved so that the whip and arrow would collide. The arrow broke and the whip was knocked off-course.

He was almost at the exit.

Come on!

Darmi’el blocked the way.

Lavellan cursed and changed course. The whip snapped at him again and caught his hand. The sharp sting forced him to drop the scroll.

He reached for it—

The whip snapped again and wrapped around the scroll. The woman yanked it back towards her.

He scowled at the soldiers and rested his hand on the daggers, shoulders tense, backing away from them. They watched one another, waiting for somebody to make the first move.

Cornered, his mind whispered but he ignored it because to acknowledge it was to make it real. He could escape. He had to.

Darmi’el stepped forward, sword out. His face was grim. “Ras’virelan,” he greeted.

“Lord-General,” Lavellan returned.

“I do not understand. Why are you doing this? You are one of the most loyal men I know.”

“There’s your answer.”

“This is a clear betrayal!”

“This is the play you watch. Not the efforts behind the stage.”

“Are you saying you were put up to this? Just tell me who! I will ensure they are brought to justice and that your name is cleared! I am sure Lord Dirthamen will understand—”

Lavellan rushed without warning and delivered a storm of slashes, made certain that their weapons wouldn't touch.

Darmi'el kept up, just barely. A testament to his skill. He dodged another of Lavellan's attacks but Lavellan had been waiting for that moment.

He struck at Darmi'el's exposed neck—

The silver whip snapped between them and forced Lavellan to move back. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. The other soldiers had stood back earlier since they must have been confident in Darmi'el's skills but now they joined in. Lavellan wasn't sure whether he should be flattered.

"Five to one?" asked Lavellan and uncapped one of his dagger hilts, took the poison inside and poured it over his blades. "Is this not shameful?"

"Pardon us, Ras'virelan, but you are difficult."

Lavellan laughed to himself as he dodged an arrow and rolled away from the whip, ducked a soldier's slash, turned, cut the back of their knee. They fell with a cry. That poison would kill them soon.

He held both daggers with one hand and grabbed a throwing knife strapped to his thigh. He threw at the archer perched on one of the shelves.

They fell with a gurgle.

Lavellan turned just in time to avoid another soldier's slash and slit their throat. He threw the body at Darmi'el and they collided.

The silver whip cracked again.

Lavellan used the table as cover, took out another throwing knife, and threw it at the whip-wielder. It stabbed through her wrist. She dropped her whip with a cry.

Darmi'el recovered and charged at him.

Slash.

Lavellan ducked, shouldered Darmi'el's gut. Darmi'el staggered back and Lavellan ran for the woman, eyes on the scroll in her other hand.

"Lytharna!" Darmi'el cried out in warning. The woman, Lytharna, dropped the scroll and ripped the knife out and threw it back at Lavellan. He knocked it aside with his dagger. She picked the scroll up again.

Lavellan attacked but she dodged, her aura flashing with severe ferocity.

Heavy, running footsteps from behind neared Lavellan. He felt the approach of a blade.

He threw his dagger at Lytharna and during the split second that her gaze involuntarily followed the movement, he grabbed her throat and spun them.

Darmi'el's sword which had been meant for Lavellan plunged through Lytharna instead.

She screamed. Darmi'el's face fell.

Lytharna let go of the scroll. Lavellan caught and pocketed it, picked up the dagger he'd thrown, and dashed.

Darmi'el roared. He gave chase, letting out a battle cry.

Lavellan's heart raced, his vision narrowing, that exit the only thing in focus. He had to get out. There was no other choice. They couldn't get him. He wouldn't let them.

He was almost out of the threshold, could see the glimmering line of blue on the ground. His magic would return if he passed it. Just a little further—

A silver whip wrapped around his ankle.

His stomach dropped.

It pulled. He tripped.

Lavellan looked back. Lytharna was slumped on the ground, one hand still on the whip. A final, dying effort.

Darmi'el descended upon him, swung his sword

Lavellan rolled onto his back, brought up his daggers.

The blades clashed and sparked and rang in their ears.

But Lavellan's daggers held.

He let out a shocked breath. Darmi'el was too full of fury to be surprised. He brought his sword down again, again, again. Each hit hammered into him, jarred his bones. Lavellan gritted his teeth.

Doom and unease curled in his chest, building in the core of his bones.

When Darmi'el brought his arm back, Lavellan rolled away and sword met stone floor. He got back up on his feet, but Darmi'el didn't even pause for breath.

Their blades met again.

This time, Lavellan's daggers cracked.

Lavellan's blood fled his face.

The blades shattered.

Shit—!

He dropped the daggers and jumped back before the poisoned shards could cut him.

Darmi'el pointed the sword at Lavellan's throat. "Surrender," he snarled. "You are outnumbered."

Lavellan panted, eyes frantic as they darted around the room, his mind racing as fast as his heartbeat. There had to be a way out. He always found a way. He had to.

Darmi'el's sword pressed against his neck. "Yield," he ordered, face dark with fury and grief.

His dagger lay in pieces, his stamina and constitution weren't suited for a prolonged melee, and he had no magic.

No way out this time.

Lavellan bit back a frustrated yell. He hung his head and raised his arms, caught the reflection of his livid eyes on the blade near his neck. The taste of failure coated his throat like a funeral veil.

Darmi'el kept the sword pointed at him as he spoke into the Arlathanian crest on his cloak's clasp, calling for reinforcements. He lowered the sword once the reinforcements arrived. They retrieved the scroll from Lavellan and brought out the shackles.

Lavellan's gaze fell on the scroll cylinder on the table.

If he couldn't bring the proof to Dirthamen...

Then he'd bring Dirthamen to the proof.

Lavellan reached into his pockets, grabbed the earring he always carried with him, and removed its clutch.

The soldiers, seeing that he was reaching into his pockets suspiciously, hurried to shackle him.

Lavellan ran for the table, made a grab for the scroll's cylinder—

They pushed him to the floor and pinned him in place, bound him with shackles enchanted to be unbreakable.

He smiled. Too late. He'd thrown the clutch into the cylinder. Now he just needed to find a way to deliver the earring to Dirthamen.

They hauled him up and Lavellan looked back at the table. One of the soldiers returned the scroll to the cylinder and placed it back into the hidden compartment, covering it with the dragon skull.

They would dig around his memories later to determine who he was working for, what his motives were. No matter what, he couldn't let them access his memories. They'd find out where Solas' sanctuary was, what his plans were, and realise that Dirthamen was helping them.

He couldn't let that happen.

Once they left the tower and passed the boundary of the magic-suppressing runes, Lavellan brought his hands together behind his back and dug his nails into and down his arm. Blood slipped over his fingertips.

There was a blood magic spell that would lock his memories away. It was strong, absolute.

But the price was that he'd slowly forget his own memories, beginning from the earliest ones.

That was fine. He was willing to pay.

Lavellan took a breath.

He cast the spell, a red halo surrounding him. The soldiers yelled in alarm and forced him back down to the ground, clapped a magic-suppressing collar on him and replaced his shackles with ones that covered his whole hands.

But it was already done.

The moment they brought him in front of Elgar'nan, he knew his fate was sealed.

Darmi'el kicked the back of Lavellan's knees and made him kneel, his knees grinding against opulent marble floors.

"Ma Venuralas," said Darmi'el as he knelt as well, voice steely, gripping the chain attached to Lavellan's collar. "This traitor has been rooting through your archives. He meant to steal the scroll ____"

"Under the dragon skull?" asked Elgar'nan.

"Yes, ma Venuralas. We were also unable to investigate his memories. He'd cast a spell to lock it away."

Elgar'nan looked at Lavellan, eyes the blazing red of a sun rising over a blood-soaked battlefield. Lavellan couldn't stop the fury from boiling in his veins at the sight of him, remembered Ga'amanir, Litha'ra, those who'd suffered from his temper, his hubris. Lavellan grinded his teeth.

"You're my son's mutt," said Elgar'nan.

Lavellan met his gaze staunchly. He could wrangle Elgar'nan's neck, squeeze life and repentance out of him. He was close enough. Lavellan need only reach—

Elgar'nan scoffed, as if he was in the presence of trash from the gutters. "This is what happens when you give them an inch. They fill their heads with ambition. The gall of you to dare to attempt to craft a focus."

So that was what the original scroll was. And Mythal had used an illusion to cover the sealing spell with the original scroll's contents.

Elgar'nan scowled at him. "And I know about mutts getting a big head. Search him for any traces of that damn wolf."

Lavellan's heart dropped.

Darmi'el searched his pockets and Lavellan clenched his hands in his shackles. He took out the earring and Lavellan stopped breathing but he kept his expression schooled. Seeing that it was just an accessory, Darmi'el returned it. However, Lavellan didn't get a chance to feel relieved because Darmi'el soon found Solas' reservoir.

Elgar'nan took it, his face darkening. He dropped the reservoir and crushed it beneath his heel.

Green wisps leaked from beneath his feet and the illusion of the vallaslin fell. Wrath overtook Elgar'nan's features.

Fuck.

"He is colluding with Fen'Harel!" cried Darmi'el.

"So Fen'Harel is attempting to craft his own focus," said Elgar'nan, his aura exploding with fury. He turned and walked away. "Bring him to the arena. I will gather the others."

Lavellan's eyes widened. The arena? That was where Elgar'nan conducted trials and executions,

burning people alive in front of an audience. Everyone knew that no trials would be had in the arena. It was just the sham of one. The purpose of the arena was to make a statement.

“Vin, ma Venuralas,” said Darmi’el.

A cold and clammy sensation settled deep within Lavellan.

Once Elgar’nan left the room, Lavellan moved.

He headbutted Darmi’el.

Darmi’el staggered back, caught off-guard. He tried to send lightning through Lavellan’s chain but Lavellan smashed his metal cuffs down on Darmi’el’s wrist before he could. He dropped the chains with a cry.

Lavellan surged forward and clamped his teeth around Darmi’el’s neck. He tore a chunk of skin off.

Darmi’el roared but Lavellan had already disengaged, spat out the small bit of flesh he’d torn off and eyed Darmi’el’s sword.

If the Soul-breaker met the shackles enchanted to be unbreakable, what would happen?

Darmi’el pressed a hand up to his bleeding neck, unsheathing the sword in his fury. He swung.

Lavellan brought up his shackles and stretched out the small length of chain connecting his wrists, parried with it. The force of the strike sent a shockwave of pain through his bones.

The chains broke.

Darmi’el’s face fell and Lavellan grinned, eyes wide in triumph.

He refused to die. Especially not from Elgar’nan’s hand.

“Reinforcements!” Darmi’el yelled into his crest, made a grab for Lavellan’s chain.

Lavellan hit Darmi’el’s temples with the metal cuffs encircling his hand. Darmi’el staggered again, eyes glazing in disorientation. His sword dropped. Lavellan smashed his cuffs down on the blade.

The cuffs cracked open.

He freed his hand and grabbed the sword, broke the collar around his neck with it. His mana began to regenerate.

Reinforcements poured in, some helping Darmi’el who had collapsed on the ground, concussed.

Lavellan stopped thinking and tore through the soldiers. Soul-breaker broke their weapons, and Lavellan brushed aside their pathetic magic with his own spells.

I will not die, was the thought that circulated in his head.

Slash, cut, stab.

Survive.

He stopped registering his surroundings, focused on killing, bodies falling to his blade. The room

filled with the scent of blood.

Survive.

Battle cries soon became cries of anguish and fear.

Lavellan slaughtered his way through.

The room became a scene from a portrait of carnage. Broken shards of metal and blood and corpses had made a mess of the floor. His mouth still tasted of copper from having bitten Darmi'el, and Soul-breaker was tarnished with crimson.

Survive.

“Stop him!”

“Have mercy, have mercy!”

But those voices reached deaf ears, his mind already focused on one objective.

Kill.

He had to change this situation. He could change it. *He* was Change incarnate. If he said something will change, then it *will* and anyone who stood in his way would die. If blood was to baptise the change he wanted to achieve, then so be it!

“Save us! Save us!”

“Demon!”

Lavellan's lungs begged for air, his muscles prayed for reprieve, but he pushed his body to the limit and used the rush of his bloodlust and adrenaline to fuel him. He sustained injuries but the pain was secondary. Negligible.

“Ras!”

Hands grabbed his arms from behind and Lavellan struggled, roared.

“Ras, I need you to calm down. I'll get you out, I promise, but you need to calm—”

Lavellan turned, blade poised to *kill*—

Metal pierced flesh.

Something binding worked its way throughout his body, a violation of will, and his vision washed with white, his muscles seizing, his mind collapsing in on itself then rebuilding.

That binding thing widened his vision again, overpowered the thoughts of bloodshed and his fixation on survival, and his senses returned to him little by little.

His gaze met violet eyes wide with horror.

Lavellan froze.

Dirthamen had an arm outstretched to Lavellan, strings of red light connecting them. But his other arm...

Lavellan cast his shaky gaze towards it.

The sword had stabbed through Dirthamen's forearm which had been raised in self-defence to stop the sword from running him through the chest. Dirthamen's blood dripped down the sword, mixed with the blood of the souls Lavellan had slain. The blade was now stained, as red as the strings of light tying them.

Dirthamen broke his hold on Lavellan and recoiled, his horror growing. Lavellan, now free to move, yanked the sword out. He dropped it with a clang, hands shaky.

"I've determined a way to break the blood-binding between us," said Dirthamen.

Lavellan traced the lines on Dirthamen's palm. "No."

"But—"

"I don't want to lose myself. Please... this is the one chain I cannot bear to break."

Dirthamen curled his fingers so that they would rest on top of Lavellan's, quiet. Then, he murmured, "Alright. I'll find other ways that doesn't involve you being bound to me. When I find it, swear you will agree to break the binding."

"Sounds like a plan."

Lavellan reached for him, gaze blurring with tears and Dirthamen reached back. Their fingers brushed.

Wait, the earring—!

Something hit the back of Lavellan's head.

He lost consciousness.

When Lavellan came to, he was in the palace dungeons, in the middle of a large magical array that left him paralysed on the floor. Shortly after, guards came to muzzle and shackle him. They hauled him up and made him walk.

Headed for the arena.

Chapter End Notes

Lord-General Darmi'el is not having a great day.

Hello to both lovers using magic that incapacitates/paralyses Lavellan in a way because they were about to be skewered by him during his rampage and then immediately being horrified at themselves for using it.

I love parallels, if you couldn't already tell :')

Where willows wail

Chapter Notes

Time's up.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They dragged him into the Arena, shackled and muzzled, a spiked rod resting on his tongue. A small, elevated platform with a lonely post rested in the middle of the Arena, surrounded by tiered stands filled with the priests and nobility alike jeering at him as he was chained to the post. A balcony boasting eight thrones oversaw the entire area.

And on the thrones sat the Evanuris.

Lavellan kept his head bowed, couldn't bear to meet Dirthamen's gaze.

Elgar'nan snapped his fingers and a wall of fire roared to life around Lavellan, wicked tongues of heat licking at his skin. Lavellan closed his eyes and breathed through it. The fire wasn't meant to kill, not yet. It was just meant to be uncomfortable, to scatter focus.

He accepted it readily. Maybe then, he could stop replaying the scene of him stabbing Dirthamen.

"This vermin deserves no trial," boomed Elgar'nan's voice. The crowd's jeering grew louder. "His treachery is as clear as day! As clear as the walls stained with the blood of the good soldiers he has slaughtered. He has also dared to try and steal precious knowledge from the gods! And see his bare face? Clearly, Fen'Harel means to send a message."

Lavellan clenched his hands in his shackles. Fuck, and now he'd dragged Solas into it too.

"For crimes against the empire," Elgar'nan declared, "he will be put to death."

The crowd yelled in agreement.

Dirthamen's voice cut through the noise. "Father, you say he deserves no trial, but there is no proof of his collusion with Fen'Harel just yet."

"Are you blind, boy? His vallaslin has been removed!"

"But what is the extent of this connection? Would it not be better to question him first?"

Elgar'nan narrowed his eyes at him. Dirthamen held his ground, kept his back straight and chin raised.

Sweat gathered on Lavellan's hairline. Hot.

"He was your responsibility, wasn't he?" Elgar'nan asked.

"All the more reason why I should interrogate him first," said Dirthamen.

Elgar'nan scrutinised him for a while longer, before his expression morphed into something thunderous. "You *fool*, you got attached. Question him? You simply have no wish to see him die.

Have you lost all sense, boy? You saw for yourself his mad bloodlust.”

The first crack in Dirthamen’s composure appeared. Lavellan blinked away the sweat on his eyelids, heart in his throat. *No, don’t let them see.*

“I am just imploring you to stop and think,” Dirthamen said. “Could this be a political machination? Was there coercion or blackmail involved? If there is a plot, how deep does it run? Or is it too much to ask you to use your head, *Father?*”

“Dirthamen!” hissed Falon’Din. Lavellan instinctively moved his tongue to talk, but the spikes in the rod prodded at the muscle and the roof of his mouth. He winced.

“What did you say to me?” asked Elgar’nan, voice and expression darkening.

“Think of the implications of his death,” continued Dirthamen. “Do you realise how integral he’s been to the safety and stability of the empire?”

“Under *your* command. Replace him with someone else.”

“He can’t be replaced!”

“Then that is *your* shortcoming for depending on one man alone for so much. You’ve let your guard down. He was scheming right under your nose! You allowed him to collect so much power, and now he’s come to bite the hand that feeds. He must die.”

The air trembled from a faint pressure of ambient magic.

“You court your ruin,” warned Dirthamen.

Elgar’nan tensed. “Is that a threat, boy?”

The crowd had been so loud earlier, but now they were quiet, quivering or delighting in the brewing animosity.

“I will not have you ruin the state of the empire because your first resort is always death,” said Dirthamen. “You have long since been this short-sighted, ordering deaths left and right without waiting.”

Elgar’nan laughed cruelly. “Well, is it any wonder the mutt ended up so vicious when its owner has the gall to talk like that to his father!”

Elgar’nan’s court muttered in agreement.

“Is it any wonder the son has the gall when the father is short-sighted and intemperate?” Dirthamen shot back.

The crowd rippled with shocked and delighted murmurs alike. Lavellan glanced back and forth between them, dread pooling in his stomach, then looked at Mythal. She appeared as serene as always, but there was a tightness to her posture. Why wasn’t she stopping this? Where was her famed mediation when they actually fucking needed it?

“Watch your words, boy,” said Elgar’nan. “Are you defying your father?”

“So we cannot even disagree without it being a defiance? It is always a defiance with you. You are no father; you are a tyrant.”

The ripple of murmurs within the crowd became a storm.

Elgar'nān stood, his face twisted in rage. "You—"

Sylaise shifted forward. "Father, I do not think Brother meant to—"

"Silence!" Elgar'nān snapped, his voice making the other Evanuris flinch.

Sylaise pursed her lips and leaned back against her seat. Mythā closed her eyes and bowed her head, looking as if she wanted to nurse a headache.

"You ungrateful brat," Elgar'nān accused, pointing a finger at Dirthamen.

"If you want me to be grateful then give me something to be grateful for."

Falon'Din tugged at Dirthamen's sleeve, whispered something to him, expression strained, but Dirthamen shook him off and ignored him.

Elgar'nān stared Dirthamen down. "Is this a declaration of war, boy? What can *you* do?"

Dirthamen set his jaw and stood so that he wasn't forced to look up at Elgar'nān, the air beginning to grow crushing. Was that from the ambient magic or the flames? Lavellan couldn't tell. Hot.

"What can I do?" Dirthamen asked. "Remind me, what won you your precious war? Your sword? Don't make me laugh. It was my wit that gave your sword direction. Without me, you would have fallen to the Children of the Stone, rotting in a pit underground."

The atmosphere soured. Lavellan tried to move but the shackles sent a warning jolt of electricity through him. He stilled. Sweat stung his eyelids. His vision swam, the disorientation from the heat worsening.

"You would declare war on your own father? All because of a *mutt*? A mutt that you couldn't contain properly?" He swept his arms out, gesturing at the rest of the Evanuris. "You would wage war on your *family*?"

Dirthamen faltered.

Bastard, that was a low blow.

"You would divide us, all because of *your* selfish whims? If I am to be a tyrant, then what does this make you?"

Everyone held their breaths.

Dirthamen looked lost for a flicker of a second, but his expression hardened, resolute determination shimmering through.

No, he mustn't! If Dirthamen continued to defend Lavellan, that would reveal a weakness, and some may find his defence of Lavellan unfair. Lavellan had killed all those soldiers, and those soldiers had families. How would those people feel if their god sided with their loved one's murderer? They couldn't afford a civil war either. The empire was already weakened from the rebellion and this issue with the Forgotten. At least Solas' rebellion was carefully planned and controlled. Adding another war on top of that would be like handing Elvhenan on a silver platter to the Forgotten.

Lavellan couldn't put Dirthamen in a position of having to choose between him or his family.

He had to take himself out of the equation.

“What’s your answer, *son*?” asked Elgar’nan. “Is this a declaration of war?”

Dirthamen raised his chin, a challenge lining his shoulders.

He would do it. He would start a war. All because of Lavellan.

“You’re so afraid of arguing with your family, with me, so you walk away. You’ll have to stand your ground one day. You can’t keep covering your ears.”

Of all the times to listen to Lavellan—

He fought against his chains, ignored the bright sparks of electricity flooding into him. Elgar’nan didn’t spare him a look, ignoring his thrashings as a futile sign of struggle, but Dirthamen looked.

Dirthamen had always looked.

Lavellan shook his head, gaze imploring.

Stand down.

Dirthamen’s face fell.

Please, my love, be sensible.

The arena was silent, waiting for Dirthamen’s answer.

The rest of his siblings looked tense, waiting for a hidden fall.

Dirthamen looked away from Lavellan and back at his father, his shoulders tensing even further.

For a moment, Lavellan had a sinking feeling that he wouldn’t listen. But then, Dirthamen’s shoulders fell and he pointedly turned his head away from Elgar’nan.

“No,” Dirthamen whispered.

“What was that?” asked Elgar’nan.

“No,” he said, louder, firmer. “I will not wage war.”

“Good. So you haven’t lost your mind after all.” Elgar’nan turned towards Lavellan, raised his hand, ready to call forth even more flames and burn him alive. Lavellan steeled himself. Maybe Dirthamen could recover the earring from his ashes.

Elgar’nan paused.

“No,” said Elgar’nan, lowering his hand. “I have a better idea.”

He turned to Dirthamen

“You do it.”

Dirthamen stared at him. “What?”

“Your mutt, your responsibility. *You* put him down.”

Dirthamen didn't move, didn't speak. Lavellan hung his head and closed his eyes, swallowed down a frustrated scream.

“Fine,” said Dirthamen, the word sounding heavy, as though it were tied to an iron block dropped below the ocean. Final. Resigned. Plunging ever deeper. “But I will not make a public spectacle out of it.”

“That will not do.”

“Do you really wish to waste your time and effort preparing for war? Or will you make this easier for everyone and yourself and just grant me this simple request?”

Lavellan opened his eyes and stared up at them again.

Dirthamen seemed composed once more, as if he'd never started a spat with the All-Father in front of an audience. Private execution could work. Lavellan could pass him the earring and tell him what he'd found.

“Husband,” Mythal said, finally speaking up. She held Elgar'nān's hand in placation. “Grant this request. The end will be the same. I will supervise it if that will ease your worry.”

Fuck. Not with Mythal watching.

Elgar'nān scowled, then unsheathed his sword. The crowd stirred. But Elgar'nān merely gave it to Dirthamen.

“Use this. It will burn him from within. I don't want him dying painlessly. Your mother will watch.”

Dirthamen took the sword, held it as if it were the most detestable thing in the world.

Elgar'nān turned and shot a lance of magic at Lavellan without warning. A shockwave of pain rippled through his soul as the lance passed through him and more of his strength left him. His head jerked back, the back of it hitting the pole. His vision blurred.

“What did you do?” Dirthamen demanded, the sword in his hand raising slightly.

“A spell to make sure he shatters when he dies. I don't want him lurking about.”

Lavellan shuddered, the pain passing, and slumped back against the pole. At least he couldn't be broken since he had Vergala—

“My lord,” Ghilan'nain spoke up and Lavellan's heart dropped, “even if you shatter him, it will not be permanent.”

Dirthamen looked at her in warning. Ghilan'nain ignored him.

“Speak,” said Elgar'nān.

“I once helped him with a project. He melded his soul with that of a raven's. A failsafe. A way to return if he is ever broken.”

The crowd cried in outrage again.

“Soul-melding? Shameless!”

“What a brute...”

“How immoral, this man.”

“Our poor deity. His trust has been betrayed.”

“Do you know where this raven is?” asked Elgar’nan

“I am certain we could track it down,” said Ghilan’nain.

He grunted. “Good. When you find this raven, kill it.” He turned and walked away. “Dismissed. Have him sent to the chamber of fire.”

With Elgar’nan’s departure, the crowd burst into an uproar.

Go away! Lavellan shrieked at Vergala. Ever since his magic had been suppressed, he hadn’t been able to hear her or track her, but he knew she could still hear him. *Get away, as far away as possible. Don’t let them get you! Get out of Elvhenan if you can. Go settle on an island or something!*

This wasn’t even about the possibility of his return. He didn’t give a shit about that; he just wanted her safe.

At least let him keep one more important part of his life safe.

His life, which was about to be forfeit.

Several faces flashed in his head, the faces of his friends. He wouldn’t even get to say goodbye.

He recalled Solas, recalled their argument. They wouldn’t even get to part on good terms. Lavellan had so many things to say to him. *I’m sorry and thank you and I’m glad we met* among them.

But no, his last words to him were: *Coming to you was a mistake.*

No tears could fall. The heat around him prevented them.

The chamber of fire was as advertised — there was fire, towering along the walls.

Lavellan remained bound and kneeling in the middle of the sweltering room, had lost feeling in the skin under the shackles. The heat had damaged his nerves. He could no longer think, his mind addled, and all he could think of or crave was coldness. Soon, he lost the energy to keep himself up. He fell, hit his head on the floor and grunted at the dull flare of pain. At least the floor was cool.

He pressed his cheek to it, watched the flames dance.

Hot. Too hot. Too bright.

His mouth felt like a desert.

Lavellan tried to think back to his earliest memory, but the most he could remember was... last

Quincentennial? Right, Dirthamen was feeling lonely so Lavellan had planned to be his attendant for the night to keep him company. That was barely even a century ago. His spell had already eaten up four thousand years of his memory?

Dimly, he heard the door being opened.

A burst of wind swept through the room and extinguished the flames, plunging the room into the softer light of the crystals on the walls. Blessed reprieve.

Running footsteps approached. Swish of robes in his periphery. Strong arms helped him up, but Lavellan had no strength left to stand. They laid him across their lap instead and held him close, undid the shackles, removed the muzzle and the spiked rod attached to it.

Lavellan trained his bleary gaze on them.

Violet eyes.

"I'm sorry," Lavellan rasped, ignored the pain from the raw walls of his throat rubbing against each other. He spied the bandages peering from beneath the edge of Dirthamen's sleeve. Lavellan closed his eyes, tried to apologise again, but he coughed instead and aggravated the dryness of his throat. He winced.

Dirthamen reached into his robes and pulled out a small flask of water, helped Lavellan drink. He gulped it down gratefully. Some cognisance returned to him.

"I'm sorry," Lavellan said again.

"No." He shook his head. "No, don't—I am the one who needs to apologise. I used the binding. Because of that, they caught you—"

"If you hadn't used it, I would've run you through. Don't say anything stupid like, 'I would have let you.'"

Dirthamen cradled Lavellan's cheek. "I'll get you out," promised Dirthamen. "I'll find a way. Believe me. I—" His face twisted. "I will. I'll make this right."

"Dirthamen," Mythral said, standing by the entrance and casting her shadow over them, her voice crisp and clear. "Do not do anything foolish. Your father is already agitated."

"So I just let him die?" Dirthamen demanded.

"He sealed his fate when he killed so many of the Guard."

Dirthamen bowed his head and pressed his lips together, eyes pained.

Lavellan stared at the bandages under Dirthamen's sleeve again and brushed his fingers over it, stomach churning.

"Don't mind it," said Dirthamen. "It's nothing."

"It isn't nothing. I almost killed you." He closed his eyes. "I made things worse," he whispered wretchedly. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, I'm the one who is sorry. Don't. It isn't your fault." Dirthamen shook his head, composure crumbling. "Don't— Don't make it sound as if you're saying goodbye. Don't. Please."

“I have to say goodbye. Keeping me alive will result in conflict between you and your family. We can’t afford that. You know we can’t.”

“What were you even doing in my father’s archives?”

Lavellan opened his eyes and held the hand Dirthamen had over his cheek. Even whispers travelled well in this room, so Mythal would hear everything they were saying. He couldn’t let her know that Lavellan had told Dirthamen about the scroll. At least Dirthamen was shielding him from her sight.

“I miscalculated,” was all Lavellan said. He pulled out the earring in his inner pocket and pressed it to Dirthamen’s chest. “Will you keep this safe for me? It’s your precious gift after all.”

His eyes widened. “You... carried it?”

“I always carry it.” Lavellan showed the missing clutch. “But I guess the danger of that is that I lose the clutch sometimes. If you could find it, I’d be grateful.” He gave Dirthamen a meaningful look and mouthed, “Be careful.”

Dirthamen took the earring with trembling hands and said nothing else.

“Don’t let Elgar’nan touch the El’amelan,” Lavellan continued. “They had nothing to do with this. And tell them—”

Their faces flashed through his mind along with what little memory he had left of them. He choked on his words, but he pushed through, his voice coming out thin.

“Tell them not to seek revenge, to keep watching over the world and its people.” This world he so loved. This world so bright and unruly and beautiful and ugly. This land of possibilities. Warmth built behind his eyes. “And— And please tell them I love them all. So very much.” Tears blurred his vision. “Keep Vergala safe. I don’t want her to get hurt. She’s already gone through so much because of me. And...” He took a shuddering breath in, voice cracking when he said, “Please tell Solas I’m sorry.”

The last of Dirthamen’s composure fell, shattered.

Lavellan cupped his face, as if he could keep him together one last time.

“And I’m sorry to you too. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve put you in this position. I’m sorry.” The tears fell. His aura trembled, dim. “It was an honour to have met you, to have grown with you. Thank you.”

A sob escaped Lavellan. Dirthamen pressed their foreheads together, warm drops of his tears falling on Lavellan’s cheek.

“I’m sorry to leave you,” Lavellan said. “I want you to know that you are dear to my heart. You have always been dear to my heart. We weren’t perfect but I still loved every moment we spent together. I loved every conversation we shared, I loved making you laugh. I loved—” He *loved*. It burned bright and fierce and he was crying in earnest now. “And I just love you.”

He pressed his aura onto Dirthamen because he had to *understand*. This feeling was larger than him.

Dirthamen held him closer and buried his face into the curve of Lavellan’s shoulder, trembling from his quiet sobs.

"I love you too," whispered Dirthamen. "I'm sorry." Over and over like a mantra, he repeated them, an unheeded prayer. His aura spilled, thick and clinging, as if singularly trying to make Lavellan stay.

A memory came to mind, close to being erased.

"I would give you the stars, if you ask," mumbled Lavellan, half-asleep in Dirthamen's arms.

"I already have a star in my arms. I would want for no other star."

And that was enough wasn't it? To have loved and to have been loved?

A land of possibilities.

He was so happy he crossed over.

"Promise me," said Lavellan. "Promise me you'll keep those we love safe. Promise me you'll keep yourself and Solas safe. Promise me."

Dirthamen tightened his embrace, aura thick with desolation. "I promise."

Lavellan smiled, his cracked lips hurting at the pull.

"I have to go now."

"No," he said piteously.

"Dirthamen," Lavellan said, gentle and consoling, "look at me."

It took Dirthamen a few seconds before he was able to pull his head up and look at him. His eyes were red-rimmed, eyelashes wet and matted, cheeks shimmering from smudged tears.

Lavellan pulled him down and pressed their lips together. It was gentle at first, but it turned desperate and mournful, vicious and loving and damning all at once. A kiss to ruin the soul. He relished it for one, last time.

When they parted, Lavellan's heart already felt destroyed. He unsheathed Elgar'nan's sword at Dirthamen's waist and offered it to him, the blade emitting a lurid light.

Dirthamen took it and threw it away. It fell with a clang.

"Dirthamen," Mythal warned from behind them.

Dirthamen snarled. "I will not kill him with that barbaric sword. If you make me do it, I *will* massacre the entirety of Father's upper court."

Lavellan tapped his chest. "Stop it."

"I mean it," he said darkly.

Mythal was quiet for a while, then she sighed. "Very well."

Dirthamen drew a dagger instead and Lavellan's eyes widened in recognition of the blade. How could he ever forget it? It was the dagger Lavellan had given to Asunara when she'd joined the ranks of the El'amelan.

“That’s Asunara’s,” said Lavellan. “Why do you have it?”

“She came to me on my way here. She said that she knew of the spell Elgar’nan had used on you and that this dagger has been imbued with magic pertaining to her abilities as a spirit of Memory.”

“It will stop Elgar’nan’s spell from breaking my soul and mind upon death.” Asunara would use this during interrogations when captured spies attempted to break their own memories or self to avoid divulging information. But the strength of the dagger’s enchantment was proportional to the wielder’s power. If the wielder was less powerful than the caster of the shattering spell, it wouldn’t work.

But Dirthamen was an Evanuris. A mountain to match another mountain’s strength.

A final mercy.

Lavellan’s heart may have been in pieces but all the pieces felt warm.

Dirthamen sat Lavellan up, angled the blade at the back of Lavellan’s neck. To sever the spinal cord. Painless.

But Dirthamen’s hands were shaking.

He gritted his teeth, trying to steady his hand, but it shook even further. Not that way then.

Lavellan smiled and held Dirthamen’s wrist, moved it so that the dagger’s tip was resting over the area where the blade could pierce into Lavellan’s heart.

“In and out, my love,” Lavellan murmured and let go of his wrist.

Dirthamen struggled, hands still shaking, tears falling and blurring his vision. But he didn’t need his vision. Lavellan had guided his hand already. All he had to do was push.

“I can’t,” Dirthamen whispered.

Lavellan wrapped his hand around Dirthamen’s, like one would when guiding someone learning to write.

He kept his gaze on Dirthamen’s eyes.

“Do you know,” asked Lavellan, “why amethyst is my favourite gemstone?”

Dirthamen shook his head helplessly, lost for words, expression twisted from his grief.

Lavellan smiled. “Because they match the colour of your eyes.”

He pushed Dirthamen’s hand, the force of it plunging the dagger into his chest.

“No!”

Lavellan didn’t let his smile waver even with the flare of pain as he pulled the dagger out, hands still on Dirthamen’s.

Dirthamen dropped the dagger, a wretched cry leaving his lips.

Blood filled Lavellan’s lungs, his heart struggling to pump with the gash now in it.

Dirthamen held him close and wept. Lavellan reached up with his dying strength and held Dirthamen's face, staring at his violet eyes. Bloodshot and shining from tears, but still beautiful.

They were the last thing he saw, cradled in Dirthamen's arms.

Lavellan closed his eyes and laid his head against Dirthamen's chest, listening to his heartbeat, content.

| *The Beyond* | 4098 FA |

A spirit stared up at the shifting skies. It looked around it, lost. What... was this place?

"Who am I?" it asked out loud, but nobody answered.

It wandered instead.

Something wasn't right. It wasn't supposed to be here. It had to go back.

But where was back?

An inexplicable emotion filled the spirit. What was it? It made the spirit want to curl up into a ball and vanish.

"Who am I?" it asked again.

But this time, there was an answer.

"You are Change."

Change turned and found a peculiar being in front of it. This being looked solid. *An elf*, its mind supplied, but it didn't know where the knowledge came from.

The elf was dressed in a white robe that billowed like smoke, holding a staff of twisted wood, his long dark hair falling like a waterfall of night. His violet eyes peered at Change.

Change tilted its head. "You look... familiar." His eyes were beautiful, but something about them looked off.

The elf's gaze flicked away. "No, not me. You're thinking of someone else."

"Who?"

"The one I'm doing this for. My brother."

"Can I see your brother?" Change didn't know why, but this brother felt important.

His grip tightened around the staff. "No."

Change deflated. "Oh. Then, who are you?"

"I am Falon'Din. I am here to guide you into the Beyond." He walked and beckoned with his staff. "Come, let us go."

Change didn't go. Falon'Din stopped and looked back.

"I think I'm meant to be somewhere else," said Change.

Falon'Din's expression hardened and Change almost shivered. That wasn't right. Why did Change think that his face was meant to be softer? Kinder?

"It's better if you stay here," said Falon'Din. "You are not wanted anywhere else. You will only bring misfortune and suffering."

Change deflated further. Oh.

With nowhere else to go, Change had no choice but to follow Falon'Din deeper into the Beyond. The further they went, the more Change felt discomfited.

This realm should feel like home, but it didn't. Change knew this was where it belonged, but...

They passed a few spirits and a few souls. Some even looked like Falon'Din — elves. They would bow at Falon'Din but then go about their way. Soon, Falon'Din stopped. It seemed like the middle of nowhere. It probably was.

"This is where I leave you," said Falon'Din.

"What do I do now?"

"Whatever you want. So long as you don't return."

Change looked down, shrinking into itself. "Because I bring misfortune."

Falon'Din's hard expression softened. "It's safer this way." He turned to walk away, but stopped after a few steps. He was silent for a while. Then, he said, "This probably means nothing to you, but his favourite colour is gold."

It truly did mean nothing to Change.

Yet... Change felt warm.

Falon'Din hesitated again. "And one final thing. Remember this name." He looked over his shoulder at Change. "Lavellan."

It was as if a drop of water had fallen into a still pond. Something within Change rippled.

"Lavellan," Change murmured. It felt binding, in a way. Change didn't feel as lost. "Thank you."

Falon'Din turned his head and walked away without another word.

Before he could get too far, Change called out, "I like your eyes!"

Falon'Din stopped again and tipped his head. "I'll tell him you said that."

Tell who? Not that Change could ask, because Falon'Din continued and seemed to have no intentions of stopping again. Change stayed still instead and watched until he disappeared.

And still, it stayed. And watched. And waited for something it didn't understand.

(☹️) Pain™

This concludes the Elvhenan arc but there's one final flashback chapter before we return to the present.

Chapter name is the same as the title of the poem about the fall of Elvhenan. Because, well, let's be honest, Lavellan's death is probably the catalyst for the empire's fall. Whether Mythal meant to trap him or if it was an accident or if it's something else is yet to be answered.

In the meantime, please take these cookies. Some of you probably need it.

Mahanon

Chapter Notes

CW: Stillbirth

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Change hadn't been in the Beyond for long when something strange happened.

The Fade and the Beyond merged. So many souls entered, screaming, wailing. Something solid and unforgiving and stifling wrapped around the world.

They called that stifling thing the Veil.

They said the Wolf created it.

They said the gods were gone. They said the All-Mother was dead.

Change felt that something had gone awfully wrong, that this wasn't how it should be, but it didn't know what else things should be. It comforted the souls instead because it couldn't bear to see them frightened and pained. At least they passed with ease.

It encountered a spirit of Compassion struggling to comfort the souls of two children so Change helped it soothe them. Once the souls had calmed and passed, Compassion made a soft noise of gratitude.

"I was just born," explained Compassion.

"Oh, you must be very confused."

Compassion nodded. "Very. But... I'm helping. I like helping."

Time passed, as it always did.

Change was bored.

It grew agitated by the year, seeking, seeking.

It roared.

Wherever Change went, a cloud of darkness would linger and surround it, the tell-tale sign of Entropy being close behind. The other spirits stayed away.

Change grabbed at itself, as if there was something within it that would have answers.

A passing spirit of Valour scoffed. "Never graceful when Change descends. Do us a favour and

twist elsewhere, then stay there.”

Change snarled and changed the scene into a deep ravine, cackled when Valour fell down a gorge with a surprised yell. But its glee didn’t last long. Soon it was back to muttering and flickering, aimless. It wanted someone entertaining! Something entertaining. It wanted anything but this wretched existence. It wanted someone to tell it where to go to relieve itself of this distress. It wanted someone to—

Save me.

Change shrank into itself.

Save me.

It tucked itself into the darkness lingering around it and kept moving.

How long it wandered, it couldn’t tell, but its bid to find something *different* must have unintentionally carried it close to the Veil.

Change took itself out of the darkness, taking a cautious peek. It had avoided the waking world because that realm seemed antithetical to its nature, and because it still recalled Falon’Din’s parting words. It didn’t want to bring misfortune. But now...

It pressed itself against the Veil in curiosity, watched the scene from the waking world playing out before its eyes.

There was a woman leading an army that fought tide after tide of enemies without relent. Change couldn’t help but follow this woman.

She was a herald of change.

Everyone either saw her as a symbol of light or a symbol of everything they needed to eliminate. After all, change was both beloved and reviled.

But she was just a woman.

Behind closed doors, she would collapse and bury her head in her hands, the darkness weighing on her shoulders, the scars from her battles hurting with phantom pains.

Change strayed too close to her dream one night and was pulled into it.

The dream was serene, the scene a never-ending stretch of crystal-clear waters, lotuses blooming on the surface. The woman stood on the surface, staring up at the blue skies.

Even in her dreams, it seemed as if there was a bright halo around her.

She faced Change, surprise flickering over her expression, before it settled into a soft yet weary smile.

“A visitor?” she asked. “Or a messenger?”

Change inched away, felt out of place in this bright, tranquil dream. The coat of its darkness was an ugly reflection in the water. An ink stain.

“Why do you hide your light in such darkness?”

“Can you not tell?” it asked. “I am close to falling.”

Her gaze shone with such an indescribable sadness. “Such is the way. Always close to falling.”

“Do you know how to stop?”

“I wish I knew, little light.” She crouched and admired a nearby lotus. “Although... I can forget the drop momentarily when I am with those I care about.” She smiled at it. “Do you have anyone like that?”

I do, it almost answered, the response knee-jerk and almost overwhelming, but stopped. That wasn’t right. Why did it think that?

“I don’t,” said Change. But the answer still sat wrong. Why? “If I find one, will they pull me out of the darkness?”

“Unfortunately, your darkness is your own. Only you may pull it away. However... it is always wonderful when someone can still see your light despite the darkness. When they accept the darkness as a part of you, but not *you*.” She traced patterns on the water, the surface rippling. “It is not their responsibility to banish your darkness, but they can offer candles to guide you. Does that make sense?”

Change stared at its reflection; a golden light almost lost in the dark. “I’m not sure. Nobody wants to come near me. They fear me. And I have nothing else to preoccupy myself with.”

The woman stared at him in gentle scrutiny.

“The world has much to offer,” she said. “Perhaps you will find your guides there.”

“Someone once told me I will bring misfortune if I cross into the waking world.”

“Must it always be night? The dawn will come. It is not always misfortune.”

Change pondered her words. “I will keep that in mind.”

Her expression brightened and she nodded. “That is a commendable attitude. Always keep an open mind. What are you called, little light?”

“I am Change.”

“I see.” She stood and dusted herself off, clasped her hands behind her back with a smile that reminded Change of autumn leaves glowing golden in the dawn. “They call me Andraste.”

And just like an autumn leaf, she later fell from her branch.

Change watched her burning at the pyre, the flames boasting the fiercest of autumn’s colours. She blazed in life, and now she blazed in death. The stories would later say Andraste died with a smile, or that she died without sound, her chin lifted, dignified to the very last. But she was just a woman betrayed. And so, she wept in pain, she wept in sorrow.

In the end, the very man who’d ordered her execution was the one to grant her a merciful death. He plunged his sword into her chest and saved her from the heat of the flames.

Change recoiled, the sight of flames and death from the blade hitting something within it.

It returned to the Fade, shaken.

Change later tried to find Andraste's soul in the Fade and help her pass, but couldn't find her.

After Andraste's death, Change grew sombre. It watched as a guilt-ridden Maferath offered the elves a new home in the Dales in Andraste's name.

The elves began their Long Walk, a journey so arduous that many perished on the way. Change did what it could to help the souls who'd pass by the Fade.

When the elves reached their home and named it Halamshiral, Change deemed its duty done and retreated to the Fade in despondence. Andraste wasn't a soul Change had known for long, but she was still one of the few who had looked at Change without ridicule or fear and saw beyond the darkness. Their short meeting would stay in its memories forever.

It wasn't until centuries later that Change decided to observe the waking world again, to see what had become of it after Andraste's death.

Halamshiral had fallen.

"No!" cried Change.

Distressed, it searched for traces of the elves, but they'd all been scattered, struggling to survive, hunted and persecuted, chased out of their own home.

The elves had separated into two factions: those who dwelt within the humans' walls and assimilated with their Andrastian faith, and those who wandered the forests. Both held onto the ancient ways as best as they could within their circumstances, but each passing year would present them with more and more difficulties.

Why were the elves always at the mercy of tragedy? Was this the price to pay for the Evanuris' ambition and greed? For the cruelty of those who'd been in power?

What bullshit! These elves were not the ones who'd inflicted the suffering of so many.

"Fate!" yelled Change, left a storm in its wake as it sought a spirit of Fate. Other spirits shied away from Change or stared in condemnation. As if they were looking at a thing close to death.

Fate was silver and blazing and almost blinding, a spirit nestled within a jagged shell of light. Most spirits couldn't touch Fate, couldn't even come close, but Change swallowed Fate's light with its coat of festering darkness and stifled the light into a dimmer glow until Change could see Fate's form.

Fate stared at Change, serene. "You do not look well," it said.

The darkness surged and choked the light further. "Is your hand so cruel?" Change asked. "Is this retribution? Punish those who deserve it, not the innocent!"

"I am not the one exacting punishment. Nobody is. People rise and people fall." Fate neared the Veil and the Fade changed to reflect the waking world. They were at a busy dock, standing on the piers. Fate swept its gaze across the ships. "People steer the ships of their lives, and the ocean is this so-called fate. Storms come; storms go. It has nothing to do with cruelty. Good people

sometimes face storms and bad people face calm waters. Sometimes the opposite. Sometimes neither. Often both.”

Change gripped its head and snarled. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. I don’t know myself. I doubt anyone does.”

“They do not deserve storms.”

“Not many do. And even then, who is anyone to dictate whether another deserves storms?” Fate raised its hand, the sunlight diffusing through its almost translucent fingers. “If you feel so strongly about it, why don’t you help guide the ships yourself? Be the wind in their sails.”

Change retreated from the Veil and turned away. “Have you lost your mind? Do you see my state? Coming too close to the waking realm may just destroy me. I doubt I can weather crossing the Veil.”

“Or it could renew you.”

Change paused, turned, but Fate was already giving it an intent look.

“I don’t like how you’re looking at me,” said Change, wary.

“I don’t like what I’m seeing,” replied Fate, its translucence fringed by pulsing light. “You have weathered quite the storm.”

“Have I?”

“When were you born?”

Change thought on it, then shrugged. “Does it matter? Does anyone remember? What about you, when were *you* born?”

Fate was quiet for a while, scrutinising him. Then it made a soft, understanding sound. It turned and drifted away from him, the shell of its light brightening the further the distance between them grew.

“Help steer the ship or don’t,” said Fate. “It is not as if I can tell you what to do. But you have your own ship to steer. It does not have to end with you capsizing despite how dark the waters seem.”

Change decided to become the wind in the sails.

It wasn’t certain why it had chosen the elves to guide. Perhaps it was because they were suffering the most from the consequences of too much change, perhaps Change was still thinking of Andraste, perhaps it stemmed from something even deeper than that. Whatever the reason, Change did its best to steady them.

The Dalish tended to face the more unpredictable problems, and Change was better suited to helping them, so it flitted from clan to clan, guiding the mages of the clans in their dreams.

It still didn’t dare to cross the Veil, too afraid of the pain, the danger, and it was already unstable

enough. It didn't want to aggravate its condition.

During a small congregation of different clans, Change heard that one of the attending clans was a clan named Lavellan. It perked up in recognition, recalling Falon'Din's words. Change wasn't certain why it sounded so important. It just was.

That was how Change found itself following Clan Lavellan, appearing to the Keepers in their dreams and pointing the way to the places with the least danger or good resources, warning of incoming danger. But it never revealed itself fully. If any of the Keepers asked about Change's identity, it would leave their dream. So they stopped asking.

Something about helping the clan also stabilised Change enough that Entropy didn't feel as imminent. The risk was still there, but it was manageable. The coat of darkness also no longer hounded Change's every step but Change still kept it as a source of comfort and as a way to obscure its identity. It wasn't certain why it felt the need for such secrecy, but it felt natural.

Generations passed. The elders died, the children grew up, had children, died, and those children would grow up, have children, die.

Deaths were always sorrowful for Change, but as Fate had said: people rise, people fall.

Change sometimes neared the Veil so it could watch the clan go about their daily life. Sometimes, Change would watch the hunters practice drills and mimic how they shot their arrows and swung their swords because something about it was familiar.

While sitting in on a tale the Hahren was telling the children, Change overheard a passing conversation.

"Could it be one of our gods?"

"Hush, Deshanna," said the Keeper. "We mustn't speculate. Whoever or whatever this being is, it wishes to remain unknown. We must respect it."

"Maybe a spirit... Likely a spirit, right?"

The Keeper sighed.

Deshanna was the newly appointed First of the clan. Her eyes always glimmered with curiosity, but she looked far older than she was, strained from the stresses of their lives.

Change drifted away from the Hahren and followed them instead.

"I'm excited to talk to it one day!" said Deshanna. "Does it really only talk to the Keeper?"

"There were a few cases where it appeared to the Firsts as well. Who is to say? Perhaps it will reveal itself to you." The Keeper tapped his staff against Deshanna's head. "But not if you keep hounding it for details."

Deshanna rubbed her forehead with a grumble. "I won't, I won't."

Change tilted its head, smiling.

That night, it entered Deshanna's dream. She froze when she saw Change, but then, she smiled.

"You're our guardian, aren't you?" she asked.

Change nodded. By now, the clan's mages knew of their shadow-cloaked guide.

"You wanted to meet me?" asked Change.

"Oh! Yes, I— Uh... I hope I wasn't disrespectful."

"Not at all. So long as you are content to accept me as I appear now."

Deshanna relaxed further, her smile brightening. "Of course. Do you have a message for me?"

"I only meant to introduce myself. Study well." It left her dream.

The next day, Deshanna gushed to the Keeper about their meeting. Change smiled to itself.

A few nights later, one of the children in the clan discovered she was a mage.

No, not just a mage.

A Dreamer.

The child, Laneira, was inconsolable, talking of terrors in her dream. She didn't sleep again that night.

The next day, the Keeper taught her how to recognise demons and defend against them. Despite the lessons, she still refused to sleep again, her large, amber eyes doleful and afraid. The Keeper assured her that he'd try to find her in the Fade and keep her safe, urging her to sleep. Laneira refused but last night's ordeal had drained her and she fell asleep anyway.

Change searched for her in the Fade, found her fleeing from Terror demons. Without preamble, it discarded its coat of shadows and let its golden light flare.

The Terror demons shrieked and scampered away, unwilling to fight a spirit much more powerful than them. Laneira shied away from Change too, frightened by its presence. Change brought its glow back into itself and wrapped itself in darkness once more, drifting towards her.

"Hello," Change said as amicably as possible. "Don't be afraid. Do you know who I am? You've heard of me in stories, right?"

Laneira didn't respond, her snowy hair falling around her frightened face.

"I'm not a demon, I promise."

Not yet, its mind whispered unhelpfully.

Change shut that thought up.

Seeing that Laneira looked like she was going to stay frozen with fear for a while, Change stood guard beside her instead.

"Alright, you don't have to talk," it said. "But I'll stay here and keep the demons away."

True to its word, it kept the demons away with its presence alone. Lesser demons didn't want to

quarrel with a powerful spirit. Greater demons thought that a weak vessel wasn't worth the hassle of dealing with Change who was showing all the signs of being close to twisting into the troublesome Entropy demon.

Laneira stayed close, but not too close. After a while, she hugged herself and started humming a tune. A lullaby?

Change said nothing and enjoyed listening instead. It seemed to help her calm down too.

No demons touched her that night.

Change guarded her every night. Sometimes it led her to the Keeper's dream so he could teach her there. Most nights, she would hum her lullaby as she tentatively wandered the Fade.

One night, she finally spoke.

"Thank you," she said.

Change glowed a little brighter. "You're welcome."

They were silent for a while.

Then, Change said, "I like your song."

She ducked her head. "It's not mine. It's just a common Dalish lullaby."

"Do you know the words to it?"

She nodded.

"Won't you sing it?"

She shook her head. "I have a terrible voice."

"Terrible, not terrible, what does that matter if you enjoy it?" It patted her shoulder. "If it makes your heart glow, it is always worth doing. So sing if you love it."

Laneira said nothing and Change didn't push her further.

Just before she woke up, she softly sang to herself, lips shaping around tentative words.

Laneira learned to control her power and eventually, she didn't need Change to watch over her anymore, could give demons a troublesome time on her own.

Some nights, she would still fear, and Change would always linger close behind.

And time passed, as it always did.

Laneira grew into her power and became more confident and settled, becoming a skilled mage and Dreamer. Once she was of age and received her vallaslin — Sylaise's, to honour her late father — the Keeper stepped down, Deshanna became the new Keeper, and Laneira became the new First.

The old Keeper gave Deshanna the book that all the past Keepers would pass down to their successor. It was a matter of utmost secrecy. Change respected them enough not to pry.

When Change congratulated Deshanna in her dream, she scrutinised Change after their conversation.

“What's wrong?” it asked.

“No, nothing. I'm just wondering...” She shook her head and smiled. “I do not wish to offend. It's nothing. Just...” She bowed. “Thank you for watching over us.”

Change bowed back.

Laneira met the First of another clan during an Arlathvhen. Ahndariel, his name was. The two fell for one another, but Arlathvhens only lasted for a week, so they separated with a promise to see one another again. Their chance came when their two clans ended up passing one another three years later. The two clans settled close to each other for the time being since the forest was large and had enough resources for everyone.

Love blossomed, they handfasted and married.

And one day—

“Ahndariel!” yelled Laneira, rushing towards her husband. She tugged at his arm and he blinked, bewildered.

“What? What's wrong?”

Laneira beamed from ear to ear. “I'm with child!”

“...Oh no.” He clutched at his hair. “I need to come up with terrible jokes to embarrass them with soon! Wait, I'm not ready for that responsibility!”

Laneira smacked the back of his head.

Both clans erupted into celebration after the news. That night, Change visited her.

“Congratulations,” it said.

She placed a hand over her belly and smiled. “Thank you. I hope I will be a good mother.” Her smile faded, disposition turning sombre. “My child will not be born into a kind world, however.”

A solemn silence settled over them.

“I have always watched over the children of Clan Lavellan,” said Change. “Your child will be no different.”

Her smile returned. "I have no doubt of that. Thank you."

"No, that name is terrible!"

"You take that back!"

The two clans argued over the name of Laneira and Ahndariel's child around the campfire. The couple themselves just sat exasperated and amused respectively as the scene unfolded. Someone threw a cup at one point and Change snorted.

"We already have a name," said Ahndariel with a grin that was perpetually stained with mischief.

"If you came up with it then it's sure to be terrible."

"Uncle," Ahndariel complained.

Laneira laughed. "Oh, they *were* terrible, so I just came up with some and asked him which he liked."

Ahndariel feigned sulking. "Betrayal! Woe. My heart bleeds."

"If this boy ends up with your sense of humour, the world is done for," said Ahndariel's uncle.

"If this boy ends up being as troublesome as him, *I'm* done for," complained another. Clan Lavellan's Warleader, Hanathir. "I'm the one who has to teach him."

"It's not guaranteed he'll be a hunter. Maybe he'll want to be a Halla Keeper."

"And end up as smelly as you?"

The others shushed them.

"[Mah, shalelan, anor, saron^{\[1\]}](#)," Laneira recited, smiling. "One who will protect life in the future, while standing with his home, his family. The notion that while he may have to be a protector, he needn't do it alone."

Ahndariel placed his hand on top of Laneira's and smiled.

"Mahanon," said Ahndariel.

Laneira and Ahndariel retreated with the Hearthmistress and Keeper to an aravel at the start of Laneira's labour, and there they stayed for three hours. Everyone was abuzz with excitement. The birth of a child was always a joyous occasion, but more so for the Dalish who saw the children as the future.

Change neared the Veil and watched. It had seen many births before, and its heart had always filled

with warmth each time.

Although, it had also witnessed tragedies. There were those who'd died from childbirth, either mother or child or both. But there didn't seem to be any complications with Laneira's labour. Everything went as it should.

But when Mahanon was born, he was silent. No cries. No movement.

Change's heart sank.

The Hearthmistress stayed calm, feeling for the baby's pulse.

"What's wrong?" Laneira asked weakly.

The aravel was quiet.

"Hearthmistress?" Laneira asked again. "Why— Why isn't he crying? What's wrong?"

Keeper Deshanna and the Hearthmistress shared a grim look.

"There's a heartbeat," said the Hearthmistress, "but it's... It's very weak."

Ahndariel's face fell. "But he's okay, right? He'll be okay?"

They didn't answer. The Hearthmistress and the Keeper fussed over Mahanon, doing all sorts of things to coax him into waking.

Change drifted closer to the child, frowning. There may be a heartbeat, but Change couldn't sense a soul within.

Souls and death were fickle things. If the soul sensed that the body may not be viable soon, it would depart, regardless of whether this sense was true or not. Without a soul to occupy it, the body couldn't be sustained. Strong-willed characters could sometimes persevere and stop their souls from departing despite their failing body, and help may even arrive at this time to help restore the body to a viable state.

Perhaps there had been a complication in the womb or during birth that made Mahanon reject the body. Change wasn't sure.

"Give him to me, please," said Laneira, reaching out desperately, strands of hair sticking to her sweat-matted forehead, her eyes large and wide with fear.

Change was reminded of when it had first saved her from Terrors.

"*Please*," she begged, and Change's heart cracked. They gave Mahanon to her and she cradled him, patted his cheek, rubbed his chest. "Mahanon?" she whispered. "Mahanon, it's Mamae. Mahanon? Wake up, baby. Please?" Her face twisted, tears shimmering in her eyes. "Please. Please, baby, wake up."

Change stared at Mahanon. The body was dying.

Unless...

Unless Change occupied the body so that the body could have a soul again. But should it interfere in such a manner? Stillbirths were tragic but they happened, and they would keep happening. If it entered Mahanon's body, what would be the implications? It would have to cross the Veil, it would

have to live as a mortal. And if it went, who would guide Clan Lavellan?

Laneira wept, screamed and held Mahanon close.

Change shook.

It cared about the clan members in different yet equal ways, but Laneira... It had been with Laneira as she'd grown, had stayed with her in dreams, had communicated with her more than it ever had with previous mages.

And it couldn't bear to see her in such a devastated state.

No, she'd gone through enough. She'd seen her entire family die in front of her, had lived in fear of her own abilities for so long, and now that she could finally have a semblance of happiness, it was going to be taken from her?

But everyone had suffered in some way. Could Change afford to pick and choose? Because of personal attachment? How was that fair to the others?

"Help steer the ship, or don't."

Ahndariel held Laneira as she sobbed and screamed her sorrow out.

So what if this was personal attachment? Clan Lavellan was Change's to protect.

But it was a risk. The crossing may be too traumatic for Change. That may just finally push it to twist into Entropy, and an Entropy demon in physical form would be a nightmare for everyone.

It was too much of a risk.

"It does not have to end with you capsizing despite how dark the waters seem."

Mahanon's heartbeat was fading.

"Must it always be night?"

Impulse gripped Change. Before it could think any further, it reached for the child, met the resistance of the Veil.

Pain exploded and shattered within Change.

But... it was as if the pain was lessened. It hurt, but the hurt was not as terrible as Change had been expecting.

Change settled within Mahanon's body, plunged into darkness as it assumed the baby's senses, felt the warmth of skin, heard the sobs near its ears. Tiny heartbeats.

And the physicality hit Change like a hammer. Cracked constrictions.

Change struggled, its stability unwinding. It strained to hold on, to keep itself together.

It mustn't twist. No matter what!

Live, *live*!

But despite its convictions, it was too difficult. There was nothing for it to grasp, no anchor to tie

itself to, no singular point to focus on.

No candle in the dark.

Change felt itself unravelling.

No...

I'm sorry, Laneira.

It was going to split open. Too much—

“*Elgara vallas, da'len,*” came the broken voice by its ear, singing a shaky tune. A familiar tune. The one which Laneira had always hummed in her dreams.

A candle flickered in the dark.

The voice continued. Change focused on that flickering flame, stayed within its envelope of light.

“*Mala taren aravas, ara ma'desen melar.*”

Your mind journeys, but I will hold you here.

The turbulence within Change eased, and the confines of physicality no longer felt as choking so long as it concentrated on the voice.

A song to breathe life into him.

“*Ma garas mir renan, ara ma'athlan vhenas.*”

Follow my voice, I will call you home.

Change followed the voice.

His memories retreated into the very depths of his being, this new body still unable to handle the load of information.

But that was alright.

The voice had led him home.

The baby stirred.

And released an almighty wail.

Everyone within the aravel wept in relief.

Laneira held her child even closer. “My little fighter,” she whispered and soothed him, kissed his forehead. “Hush, hush, Mamae is here.”

“Our guardian is gone,” said Keeper Deshanna with a solemn expression.

Laneira stopped rocking Mahanon on her knee and stared at the Keeper, face falling.

“Mamae,” Lavellan asked, “why do you always sing that lullaby?”

She ruffled his hair. “I almost lost you once. But you came back when I sang to you. And when I was lost or afraid, I sang this to myself and calmed down. I think this is a song for those needing comfort, da’len. To call them home.”

Lavellan sang the lullaby to himself through his tears, kneeling before the sapling they’d planted to mark Mamae’s grave.

Lavellan sang the lullaby to Ellana as she clung to him and wept.

Lavellan sang the lullaby as he prepared himself before going on his First Hunt.

He sang under his breath as he boarded the boat to the Conclave.

He sang after Solas left him.

He didn’t sing after Fen’Harel took his arm.

There was no more time for songs.

That broken, bloody battlefield saw the fall of a broken, bloody man.

He was almost lost.

But then, he returned with the faint whisper of a lullaby in his ears.

The memories rushed past like the river's current, carried the fleeting emotions of pride, anger, sorrow.

Love.

It all blurred together, yet every memory was distinct.

Every touch, every laughter, every breath of hope, anguish, triumph, defeat. Everything. It all returned. A sequence of events from Elvhenan to him taking his steps towards the Well of Sorrows for a second time.

Spirit, spymaster, friend, lover, guardian, son, brother, Warleader, Herald, Inquisitor.

All that he was and all that he would be. Whole once more.

Water rushed around his ears.

Welcome home.

Mahanon Lavellan opened his eyes and gasped in a shuddering breath.

Chapter End Notes

I rewrote chapter 1 because I've been meaning to for a while. It was a little all over the place because I wrote it when I was at a lower skill level and was still getting to know Lavellan.

As with rewriting, I'm aware a lot of parts that some of you may be attached to have been taken away and it wasn't easy for me to let go of them either, but now I know Lavellan better and am happier with the rewrite. I still have the old chapter 1 version with me though. If some of you really miss it that much, I can send a google doc link or something haha

Both times Lavellan crossed, it was because of a person :(Also, the lyrics of the Mir Da'len Somniar lullaby and how it applies to Lavellan still makes me emotional.

Some questions are still left unanswered but for now, huzzah!! We've finished the flashbacks! Total words: 67k LMAO. It's long enough to be its own stand-alone fic
cries

Translation

[1] **Mah, shalelan, anor, saron:** Future, protector of life, home, together/as one [\[1\]](#)

A stem of braided flowers

Chapter Notes

I have a headache so the chapter hasn't been thoroughly edited 🙏 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

sorrows staling in the soul

Sunlight pierced into his eyes and he flinched, his skin feeling too raw, every sense muffled yet heightened all at once. A dull throbbing wrapped around his head. His power returned to him, adapting to his changed view of himself, surging so fiercely that he feared it would break through his skin.

But something warm and solid was holding him. Arms. He was in someone's arms, keeping him together.

"Vhenan?"

Vhenan.

Lavellan shot up, memories bursting to the surface, but instead of his head, it was his heart which hurt the most. He clutched at his chest and curled in on himself.

The Well had been emptied but the remnants of it lingered around him as a cloud of smoke and strings of light.

"Vhenan?"

Lavellan turned his head.

Solas was beside him, eyes shining with worry. Solas. *Solas*. A walking mosaic of memories both beautiful and painful alike. Fury and remorse and love churned within Lavellan, all of them demanding for his full attention, and his disjointed memories flashed in his head, images and voices overlapping.

Loud. His head felt like an overripe fruit.

Had the sun always been this bright? Lavellan covered his eyes with a soft groan.

The smoke around him rose higher to shield him from the light in response. The Well of Sorrows' whispers in his head swelled and overpowered the overlapping voices from his memories and subdued them, swallowed them within its depths, and then retreated with them. The bright flashes of the visions became flickers, then vanished. The Well ebbed and the memories went with it.

His head cleared.

Lavellan let out a shaky breath. The smoke lowered, rolling across the ground around him instead.

He patted it unthinkingly, half delirious.

“How do you feel?” asked Solas, his voice familiar and foreign all at once.

He stared at Solas, his appearance in Elvhenan overlapping with his appearance now for a flashing second.

“Coming to you was a mistake.”

Warmth built behind Lavellan’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Lavellan and he looked down, shoulders shaking, the unsaid apology finally leaving after having staled in his soul. “I’m sorry.”

Solas pulled him close and held him. Lavellan trembled.

“There is nothing to apologise for,” said Solas.

Lavellan opened his mouth but an explosion cut his thoughts short and he raised his head in alarm. The explosion came from Calpernia’s spell.

Right. Calpernia, Samson, Arbor Wilds.

Lavellan pushed himself up. His knees trembled and almost gave, but Solas caught and righted him.

Below them, Samson was unmoving and Calpernia was leaning against her staff, trying to catch her breath. She’d won.

“How long has it been?” asked Lavellan, his own voice sounding strange. His own body felt strange. Yet right. Borrowed, then made his. He wrapped an arm around himself, dug his fingers into the spaces of his ribs to confirm the existence of his body. “Since I drank.”

“A few minutes,” said Solas.

Thousands of years within a few minutes.

Lavellan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Beneath his skin, his magic hummed and swelled like a large wave born from the disturbance in the ocean floor. The rush of water after a dam had broken.

But he had no time to feel relieved, or feel anything else besides urgency, because Corypheus entered the sanctum and their eyes met across the large expanse of the cavern.

“Eluvian,” said Lavellan. *“Now.”*

He ushered his companions to the eluvian, opening it since the Well itself was the keystone.

Corypheus pushed himself up off the ground and flew towards them, one hand outstretched in his fury, as if he was ready to grab Lavellan’s head and crush it.

Calpernia knocked Corypheus off-path with a bolt of electricity.

“Inquisitor, we cannot just enter this eluvian arbitrarily,” said Morrigan. “With so many eluvians broken, there is no guarantee that we will not be stranded within the Crossroads.”

“This eluvian is a part of your network,” he said. “Just find your eluvian. You’ll sense it. Now go

in!”

They ran in.

He kept a nervous eye on Calpernia and Corypheus’ battle. Calpernia hadn’t survived last time, and now she was worn down from her fight with Samson.

Ellana hesitated to go in. “Hanon,” she started.

He smiled and shoved her in. She didn’t even get the time to curse him out.

But Abelas stayed. As did Solas.

Lavellan scowled at them. “Get in, both of you.”

“I have a duty,” said Abelas.

Lavellan bit his inner cheek, flicked his gaze towards Solas. “And you?”

Solas didn’t move. “I know you are planning to stay behind.”

Lavellan didn’t respond.

Last time, when they’d left through the eluvian, Corypheus had slaughtered some of the Inquisition’s forces in his rage before he’d fled. Lavellan would try to find a way to stop him from doing so this time. The eluvian had also been broken behind them last time because Corypheus tried to give chase. But what if Lavellan could keep it? That would be a way to connect the Arbor Wilds to Tarasyl’an, and it would make the trip to find Mythal’s dragon faster, as well as make it easier for their troops to return.

He and Solas shared a heavy look. Lavellan hung his head and sighed, then took his hand off the eluvian and closed it.

“Whatever you see,” said Lavellan, “don’t ask. I’ll explain it all in due time. Okay?”

Solas paused, nodded.

Abelas stared at Lavellan. “Have you retrieved everything?” he asked.

“Everything,” Lavellan confirmed.

Another explosion. They turned their heads. Corypheus had Calpernia by the neck and they were snarling at one another.

Lavellan took a deep breath, reached into the reservoir of power with him. A spell came to mind.

Despite the thousands of years’ worth of memories and knowledge, they didn’t strain Lavellan’s mind because they were now a part of the Well — bundled up and compacted so the host wouldn’t be hurt. His knowledge would come when summoned, but otherwise, it would dwell within the Well.

Lavellan made the gestures and arm movements for the spell, gathering ambient magic, his magic rushing to the surface.

Solas’ eyes widened in recognition of the spell. But true to his word, he didn’t ask.

A banishment spell. It was meant to expel entities from one realm to another, usually the waking world to the Beyond. But he knew of a modification of the spell. One that could, in a sense, teleport an entity to another space in the same realm by using the Beyond as a passage.

“The Veil,” started Solas. “It will not work.”

Lavellan stopped.

Shit, the Veil.

But there was no time left to think. Corypheus had thrown Calpernia away and her body fell, limp. Dead. Damn it.

Corypheus flew at them.

Lavellan stared at his left hand.

Then just had to tear the Veil himself so the Fade could be used as a passage. Like unsealing both ends of a tunnel.

This was going to hurt.

Corypheus neared. Abelas readied a spell, Solas readied his staff—

Lavellan threw his arms out as if pushing against an invisible wall and cast his spell, screamed as he simultaneously tore open the Veil.

The force of the spell stopped Corypheus, his claws just shy of stabbing into Lavellan’s eyes. The air shimmered between them.

Lavellan couldn’t fuck this up, otherwise he’d either deliver Corypheus straight to the Fade or he’d find out just how sharp those claws were.

But the *Veil!*

Fucking hell, Solas!

He gnashed his teeth. His left hand flared emerald, the other gold.

Corypheus glowered at Lavellan, fighting against the force pulling him away.

Lavellan battled the Veil, straining to rip it open with the Anchor while also struggling to manipulate the Fade by proxy for the spell.

The Anchor flared, sparked, sent electric heat up his arm.

Lavellan yelled.

If this kept up, his mana would drain. He may be brimming with power, but this spell was costly.

He might need another source.

The pain climbed to his elbows.

“Solas, cut my palm!” said Lavellan.

Without delay, Solas unsheathed one of Lavellan’s daggers, took off the glove on Lavellan’s right

hand, and cut his palm.

Corypheus roared. “You insignificant rat! You have stolen what is rightfully mine!”

“Stolen?” he asked darkly and closed his palm, rubbing the blood all over his hand. Red lights swirled with the gold. The smoke by his ankles thickened. “You wield the tools of your betters and claim the power as yours, but it *isn’t*! It will never be yours. You will never understand it. You will never master it. You are forever cursed to fumble in the dark, lost and unanswered, and I will make sure you *never* see light.”

Corypheus’ face twisted in wrath.

Lavellan opened his palm and the energy he’d gathered from his blood poured into the spell. A metallic scent filled the air along with sweet lightning.

The air whined.

The Veil snapped.

Tore.

Lavellan didn’t relent and used the momentum to make another tear in the Fade. The spell connected the two passages.

“Leave!” bid Lavellan and expelled Corypheus through the two passages. He roared, but Lavellan closed the tears and cut off his yells.

His energy left him in a rush and he staggered back.

Solas supported him, stopped him from falling, and lowered him to his knees. The smoke curling around Lavellan’s ankles dissipated.

The Anchor sparked and sputtered, sent sporadic shots of pain up Lavellan’s arm. He hissed and gripped his wrist as if he could stem the pain, but that just irritated the cut on his palm. Solas took both of Lavellan’s hands in his, soothed the Anchor and healed the cut.

The pain eased, but Lavellan’s headache worsened.

He leaned against Solas and caught his breath.

“I forgot about the Veil,” Lavellan mumbled, more to himself, but Solas heard.

“As did I when I first awoke.” He was looking at Lavellan as if he had all the pieces in his hands but didn’t know how to put them together. “Do *not* perform blood magic in front of others.”

“Well, that’s a given.” He tried to stand again, but he was too drained. Solas wrapped an arm around Lavellan’s waist, guided Lavellan’s arm around his shoulders, then helped him stand. “Corypheus’ absence will leave his forces panicked. His two lieutenants are gone too. That should eliminate their organisation for a long time.”

“Where did you send Corypheus?”

“Some far corner of the desert. At least we now have this eluvian. It should make it easier for our forces to move back to Tarasyl’an, if they can handle the Crossroads.”

Solas glanced at him. “Tarasyl’an,” he echoed.

“Skyhold,” Lavellan amended and didn’t elaborate on the slip. Solas didn’t ask.

He wished Solas would ask. But he did tell him not to ask.

Lavellan looked at Abelas and Abelas met his gaze, something vaguely hopeful in his eyes.

“It’s been hard, hasn’t it?” Lavellan asked with a gentle smile. “Thank you for heeding my message.”

He bowed his head. “It was the least I could do.”

Solas’ grip around Lavellan’s waist tightened imperceptibly. Lavellan shot him a questioning look, but his expression was impassive.

Lavellan turned to Abelas again. “Could you check if Samson is still alive? He’s the man in the red lyrium armour. If he is, subdue him so he doesn’t cause trouble when he wakes.”

Abelas nodded and descended to the lower sanctum.

Once he was left alone with Solas, he asked, “Am I due for a lecture?”

“No.” But he said nothing else after.

Lavellan’s lips pulled in displeasure at the lack of response. At this point, he would have accepted the lecture.

He didn’t know what else to do though.

Lavellan attempted a step but his bones didn’t feel sturdy, as if they’d been hollowed out. That banishing spell had been a gamble, but it had paid off. Now Corypheus wouldn’t be stuck here slaughtering more of the Inquisition forces out of rage. Although, now that Lavellan had released the influx of his power, it had settled back down to a significantly reduced level.

Abelas returned shortly. “The lieutenant is dead,” he reported. “His opponent was not merciful.”

Lavellan sighed. It would have been optimal if Samson had survived so he could be questioned later, but he had to work with what he had.

“Alright, thank you. What do you and the Sentinels plan to do now?”

Abelas paused in contemplation then shook his head. “I am uncertain.”

“There is a place,” Solas began.

“No,” Abelas cut off. A tense silence befell them at the abrupt and forceful answer. Perhaps Abelas was recalling the time he’d taken Solas’ offer only to see him cause havoc.

Solas’ attempts to use the red lyrium idol to fuel his spell now made sense. It wasn’t the red lyrium itself he was after; it was the poison within it. Since the idol was so potent, the poison within it could be stronger as well. Had he been attempting to recreate the Everything?

“You could stay with the Inquisition while you determine how you want to move forward,” Lavellan suggested. “Or you could stay at the temple, although none of the Sentinels are bound to their duties anymore since the Well is gone—”

“You carry the Well. Would it not be our duty to defend you?”

It certainly wasn't last time.

Lavellan frowned. "Will you really go by that logic?"

Abelas must have arrived at the same conclusion because he looked away, expression strained.

"Don't worry about me," said Lavellan. "These Sentinels don't know me and have no allegiance to me. It's best not to force these things. Discuss it amongst yourselves later." He stared at the eluvian again and held out a hand, opened it. There was much to be done.

"By your leave," said Abelas with a small bow. "I wish to determine the state of the Sentinels."

"You don't need my permission. Go."

Abelas left with a nod. After a few more minutes, Lavellan regained enough strength to walk on his own.

Solas let go. Lavellan felt cold.

"I will determine if the others have made it through the Crossroads," said Solas. "Will you be alright?"

No, stay.

Lavellan nodded. Solas entered the eluvian without further fanfare and left Lavellan alone.

He balled his hands into fists. However he'd expected Solas to react, that hadn't been it.

This was the longest afternoon of his life.

A dark shape circled the skies and Lavellan's head snapped up, his heart filling with an emotion he couldn't name. He reached for their connection and tentatively tugged on it.

"Vergala?" he asked. *"Do you hear me?"*

He hadn't been able to connect to her because a spirit's abilities were tied to its self-image. While he'd known he was Change, he hadn't known she was holding a part of him. But now...

Would it work? Would the Veil affect it?

Lavellan?

He sucked in a breath.

Then, more urgent, *Lavellan?*

"I hear you, come quick!"

Vergala flew towards him, swooped.

Instead of a very warm and touching reunion like he'd imagined, she greeted him with an indignant squawk and pecked him on the head, flapped her wings at him.

Lavellan shielded himself with his arm, boggled.

Telling me to go to an island, telling me to go away, then dying! she screeched. No, not screeched. It was a communication of intent after all, but if the intent had words, he imagined they'd sound

like a screech.

“Idiot! Smelly! Idiot!” she cawed out loud.

He smiled, relieved. But his smile didn’t hold.

What he’d done to her was unforgivable.

She perched on his shoulder and gave his head a final peck. *Stop it*, she said.

“I’ll try to find a way to undo what Ghilan’nain and I did,” he promised. “If you want.”

It's permanent.

"There has to be a way. I'm willing to look for it."

Vergala quieted.

I don't know what I want, she said after a while. Her relief brushed against him. *I'll see. I'm just happy you're here.*

Lavellan’s heart warmed and he rubbed the underside of her beak. “You’ve been waiting for all this time?”

Not too long. Dirthamen made me sleep. An undercurrent of hostility accompanied that information.

He paused.

Despondence leaked into the hostility. *I wanted to follow you*, she admitted, her head lowering. *Find you in the Beyond. But he made me stay.*

Lavellan wasn’t sure how to respond. Her mention of Dirthamen just brought up—

Don't think about him, said Vergala, a tad forceful. *What happened to him was his own fault.*

“Gala,” murmured Lavellan, almost chiding.

She shifted her feathers and turned her head away. *I'll tell Commander Cullen it's over.*

Vergala took off before he could say anything else. Lavellan watched her go.

When she was gone, he looked back at the empty well and hugged himself.

What did Vergala mean? Did Dirthamen find out the truth? The Evanuris ended up being sealed anyway, but only seven, not eight. Did Solas use Mythal’s spell or did he devise his own? What happened after Lavellan’s death? And what about Solas’ memories?

How did Dirthamen fare after Lavellan’s death?

Lavellan’s heart hurt.

“What have you done?” he whispered, posing the question to a long-gone man.

Nobody answered.

Corypheus' forces scattered, directionless in the aftermath of their unimaginable loss. The Inquisition and Orlesian forces had also suffered casualties, but when Cullen gave Lavellan the list of their dead, it was shorter than last time.

He kept himself busy, asked the Sentinels if they could borrow the eluvian and pass through the temple. Since Abelas had agreed, they acquiesced. Otherwise, they didn't interact with the Inquisition further.

So busy was he that he'd fallen back into his habit of pushing the Well away so he could focus.

It soon made its displeasure known while he was mid-meeting with Briala and a captain of the Orlesian army, blared its whispers in his head.

"Excuse me," he mumbled and retreated to a quiet part of the Wilds. He sat beside a large tree and leaned back against it. "What?" he asked the Well.

[Ma tath tel'harthas!](#)^[1]

Lavellan paused, mulling over that. "*[Hartha ahn?](#)*"^[2]

[Em'an!](#)^[3]

He rubbed his eyes. "I'm not ignoring you because I don't want to listen. I just have things to attend to and need to keep my head clear for them." He shifted forward and crossed his legs. "How about this? For every hour of every day, I dedicate a time to listen. Tell me whatever you want, and I'll listen. In return, you be a bit more courteous about interrupting me when I'm busy, and if you're feeling extra generous, lower the whispering a little. Deal?"

The Well stayed quiet, thinking it over, whispers churning in his mind.

[Vin, Mirthadra](#)^[4], it said after a moment and Lavellan frowned at the term of respect.

"Why the sudden honorific?" he asked.

[Ar'an ely ithal mar sil'vela. Ely eolasal mar nu, mar abelas, mar enasalinen, mar laimashala. Ely eolasal na. Ma ane mala amahn. Ma ane myathem.](#)^[5]

"Oh," he murmured. "Thank you."

[Syn te'silaima ar'an.](#)^[6]

"I won't," he promised.

The Well faded into the background, its whispers now much softer, more manageable, and he let out a surprised breath. He wasn't sure whether he was shocked or relieved. His mind now held more clarity.

Lavellan pushed himself up, dusted himself off, and returned to camp.

They stayed at the Arbor Wilds for a few more days, helping with the clean-up.

Ellana had tried to ask him about what he'd learned, but Lavellan would see her and realise she looked so much like Laneira — like their mother — and would be filled with a fresh flood of grief and flee.

Solas though... They'd grown distant again.

Though, to be fair, Lavellan had grown distant with everyone too. He was running, he knew. Running from the others, from the questions he needed to ask. Running from the memories of his past.

Running. Always running. Since when had he become such a coward? Where was the Lavellan who'd blazed on ahead and sought the truth despite its cost? The one who'd guided his lover's hand and steadied it even if it was to deliver a killing blow?

Then again, where had that bravery taken him? Maybe that hadn't been bravery at all. Maybe that had been foolishness.

Lavellan cast those thoughts aside and sat, tuning into the Well of Sorrows for his daily commune with them.

This was the routine now. Every morning, he'd listen to the Well of Sorrows, absorbing anything and everything they had to say. Sometimes it was nonsense, like listening to a room full of people. Sometimes, individual voices would come forward and tell their story and Lavellan would write it down. Afterwards, the Well of Sorrows would retreat, the whispers close to quiet.

His magic, on the other hand, wasn't as successful of an endeavour. After that banishing spell with Corypheus, Lavellan hadn't been able to cast any other spell. He couldn't even summon a simple flame. The Veil was also proving itself difficult. Had he been a typical mage of this current time, he'd be able to grasp manipulating it, but he was a denizen of the Fade. How he did magic was too different. And since he'd used blood magic, he hadn't been able to dream for a few nights either.

But tonight, he dreamt.

He woke up in the Fade. His boundary was gone.

Lavellan put his hands on his hips and pursed his lips. Well, shit.

At least his magic came easily here, and the Fade was responsive to him, as always. He spent most of that time wandering. He tried searching for Asunara, but he didn't know how to look for anyone. Even back in Elvhenan, he hadn't gone to the Fade like this since he'd frequently used blood magic.

Lavellan just settled for wandering the familiar paths, sometimes changing the scene if it struck his fancy.

It was disorientating when he woke up, but he supposed he'd get used to it. He listened to the Well again, then went about his morning routine.

He'd just finished gearing up when Ellana barged into his large tent and threw his bow at him. Lavellan caught it on reflex.

“Hunt,” she said. “With me. Now.”

“But I have to—”

“Not a request.” She dragged him out by the collar and marched out into the forest with him in tow.

“You can’t just walk around the Arbor Wilds willy-nilly,” he scolded. “This place is ancient.”

“Well it’s a good thing you’re around to scare anything away,” she chirped. “Hop to it!”

Amused bystanders watched him getting dragged away but none lifted a finger to help.

Soon, they were away from camp, nestled within the green heart of the Wilds, colourful birds splashing the sky with colour as they flew past.

“You didn’t bring me out here to hunt, did you?” he asked.

“I brought you out here because you were isolating yourself again,” she said. “The others are getting worried, you know? Some are afraid that drinking from the Well has affected your person. You may want to soothe Sera and tell her you haven’t been possessed by some ancient elf demon. She’s joking around, but she’s scared.”

Lavellan looked down at his feet as they walked. “I’m sorry, it’s just... There’s a lot. It’s too much. I don’t know how to start sorting through it.”

“I see. It’s like when seeing our pile of laundry in the aravel makes me want to cry.”

He burst out laughing at the mundane comparison.

Ellana grinned at him. “But I pick up each individual article of clothing, and little by little, the mound gets smaller and the clothes get washed. You don’t have to offload everything at once or try to tackle it all at once. Just... maybe pick a topic. Or a point in time.”

They found a small stream and settled by its banks, listening to the rush of water.

But there really was too much and he didn’t know where to begin. He set the bow on his lap and ran his thumb over its surface, staring at the hunting charm around his wrist. Revasha still had his grounding stone. He could return and retrieve it, show her he was still alive.

Revasha. An old and new face alike. Everyone he’d met in this current time were familiar strangers now. He knew them, but he felt so disconnected from them. As if *they* were the relics of time, not him. He was just... so adrift. Stuck between two states. Neither spirit nor elf, yet both. Once, he’d been a spirit given form, but now he was a spirit in a borrowed body. Had taken on the name meant for someone else

His gaze slid towards Ellana. She was counting the petals on a nearby wildflower.

“Mahanon was stillborn,” said Lavellan.

Ellana paused her counting. “Okay, shit, not how I figured you’d begin.”

And so, he told her of the events that had led to him becoming Clan Lavellan’s guide. When he mentioned he’d spoken to Keeper Deshanna when she was younger and had helped Laneira—Mamae when she’d awoken as a Dreamer, Ellana’s eyes widened.

“Mamae told me once about a guardian when I asked her how she handled waking up as a

Dreamer,” said Ellana. “She said the guardian had to leave because it was called to protect other people.”

“Oh,” he murmured. So that was the reason she’d come up with for his disappearance.

He hoped he hadn’t upset her too much.

“What was Baba like?” asked Ellana, her gaze and voice wistful.

“Mischievous,” he said. “Always smiling, likes to joke around, always made Mae exasperated.”

He continued and talked about the humorous events of their love story until Ellana was howling with laughter, clutching at her sides. He smiled and joined her.

One article of clothing picked up and washed.

After their laughter abated, they lapsed into a comfortable quiet. A breeze rustled the trees.

“Her love kept you here,” Ellana murmured.

He glanced at her in question.

“That lullaby was how she said, ‘I love you.’ And it kept you here.”

“Love, huh,” he mumbled and stared at the water.

During his dying moment, all he’d felt was love.

Even with Solas, even if their mutual end had been set on a stage of fire and fallen skies, there was still love buried far beneath, begging for a reason to stay.

“It would be easier if I hated them,” he said. “If I hated this world.” He picked one of the wildflowers and plucked out its petals, let them go and watched as the wind or water carried them away. “Love is worse.” He threw the petal-less stem into the stream. “But to live without loving is not living at all. Cruel, right?”

She picked the stem he’d thrown before the water could drag it downstream and picked the other wildflowers around her, braided them around that wet stem.

“It is,” she agreed. “So maybe when we say live with us, we also say love with us.” She presented the stem to him, now braided with wildflowers. “Love with us, Hanon. Everything’s going to shit, but everything always goes to shit. Don’t hide from us. We might not be able to do your laundry for you, but we can keep you company while you pick up your clothes.” She smiled. “Chores are always better when you have someone to talk to.”

Lavellan stared at her, the patched sunlight falling on her face glimmering like precious coins, emotions building in the chambers of his heart and circulating throughout his body. Words wouldn’t come.

He hugged her.

No need for words when a hug could do it for him.

Back to the present. I am full of emotions and so is Lavellan.

Lavellan really out here doing the equivalent of sweeping all your shit under your bed so it looks like your room is clean.

Translation

[1] **Ma tath tel'harthas:** You still aren't listening [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Hartha ahn?:** Listening to what? [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Em'an:** To us [\[↑\]](#)

[4] **Vin, Mirthadra:** Yes, Honoured [\[↑\]](#)

[5] **Ar'an ely ithal mar sil'vela. Ely eolasal mar nu, mar abelas, mar enasalinen, mar laimashala. Ely eolasal na. Ma ane mala amahn. Ma ane myathem:** We have seen your memories. We have known your pain, your sorrow, your triumphs, your defeats. We have known you. You are now here. You are honoured. [\[↑\]](#)

[6] **Syn te'silaima ar'an:** Do not forget us [\[↑\]](#)

Forgotten dogwood dreams

Chapter Notes

I'll be slowing updates to once a week every Thursday again. Thanks for understanding :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

spring is long behind us

The Orlesian forces marched back to Orlais through the Dales while the Inquisition forces entered the Crossroads. Most of them were back in Skyhold within the week.

Before returning, Lavellan rode back into the Emerald Graves to visit Clan Venalin. Revasha greeted him with a hug, and if it was tighter than usual, neither of them made mention of it.

“Still alive?” she asked as they separated.

“Still alive. Like a weed. I just keep coming back even when you think I’m dead.” He reached into his coat and pulled out his gift — a small, elven dagger he’d found in the temple and had taken with Abelas’ blessing. “Here. Found this. Thought you might like it.”

She took and unsheathed it, releasing an awed breath at the make.

“I’m afraid it’s more for looking pretty than being functional,” he said. “But still.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Mythal’s temple.”

She almost dropped the dagger and looked up at him, wide-eyed. “What?”

“We also met ancient elves.”

She did drop the dagger, that time.

After *that* exciting news, Lavellan met up with Keeper Hawen and told him of the temple and the Sentinels.

“But I wouldn’t advise going in to investigate,” said Lavellan. “Not yet. They’re fresh out of uthenera and their sole, remaining job is to defend against invaders. I’m afraid they’re indiscriminate about it, and this world and its inhabitants are foreign to them. Also, they’ve just been under attack. I think it would be the safest for everyone to steer clear for now and give them some room to work out how they wish to move forward.”

Keeper Hawen nodded. “Of course. Still, this news alone is... Well, I cannot find the words. But... thank you, da’len, for trying to help defend our history and our people from those who would seek to cause them harm. You do our people proud.”

“Oh,” Lavellan said softly. Keeper Hawen reached up and patted his head in grateful pride.

Lavellan was thousands of years older, had seen and done much, but this was still... The acknowledgement was still— “Thank you, hahren.”

Keeper Hawen smiled and ushered him to the campfire after, urging him to eat.

Lavellan stayed with the clan for a little longer before he geared to head off again.

“Wait, you’re forgetting something,” cried Revasha before he could mount his horse.

“I am?”

She reached into her pockets and offered him his grounding stone. Lavellan stared at it in her palm.

“Well?” she asked.

He curled her fingers around it instead and pushed it back towards her, smiling. “Keep it. I’m so scatterbrained that I just might end up losing it.” A lie. He wouldn’t ever lose something like that.

She scoffed. “Don’t kid yourself. I can tell this is important to you.” She shoved it into the outer pocket of his coat. “I don’t need it to know you won’t leave.”

“Ah,” he said, liquid sunlight surging in his lungs. “You know, I’m lucky to have a great student.”

“You really are.” She smiled. “You’re alright for a mentor, I guess.”

Lavellan laughed, that liquid sunlight in his lungs escaping with his laughter and diffusing in the autumn air.

He and Abelas stopped in front of the temple’s eluvian.

“We’ve tidied up the Crossroads so the road to Skyhold’s eluvian should be fairly visible,” Lavellan said and faced Abelas. “Let me know what decision you and the Sentinels arrive at.”

Abelas nodded. “And what of you? What do you plan to do now?”

“I don’t know yet. I still have a lot of unanswered questions. I think my next course of action is contacting Asunara. Maybe she’ll also have insight on what’s happened to Solas’ memories.”

“On the subject of the Dread Wolf, I admit, I was surprised to hear that he and you are lovers once more. Especially since...”

Abelas left the sentence unfinished.

“The heart is a foolish thing.” Lavellan chuckled dryly. “But I’m afraid we’ve pushed each other away again.”

“Will you tell him the truth?”

Lavellan paused.

“I should,” he murmured. But how receptive would Solas be to that? His own memories had been tampered with. Last time Lavellan had approached him with contradictory information without

proof, they'd argued and then Lavellan had died.

Cheery.

"I'll figure something out," said Lavellan. He patted Abelas' arm. "No need to worry. I'll be heading off now."

Abelas looked as if he still had something to say, but he merely said, "Dareth shiral, Ras."

With that, Lavellan walked through the eluvian and made his way back to Skyhold.

He had a lot of responsibilities waiting for him, and it would've been so easy to bury himself in them and keep running, but he kept what Ellana had said in mind.

Besides, he'd promised not to do this again. He had to cherish his friends properly.

After arranging to station scouts in the towns around the desert he'd shunted Corypheus off to, he shuffled awkwardly to the tavern. Some of the inner circle had gathered there to play a round of Wicked Grace. Varric's expression immediately lit up when he entered and the others stared at him in varying degrees of tentative hope.

Lavellan sat in a vacant seat and threw five silvers in before they'd even dealt his cards.

"You piece of shit," said Bull.

"Remember the last time you showed off, Glowy?" asked Varric. "You lost your clothes."

Lavellan stole Dorian's untouched ale and ignored his protests. "That's in the past. The future has new possibilities!"

The future had him losing to Leliana, but thankfully, Cullen got it in his head to challenge her, so *he* ended up losing his clothes this time. At the game's conclusion, everyone dispersed — or sprinted in Cullen's case — to return to their duties, buoyed by laughter and good food. Lavellan smiled.

Lavellan remained with Bull, Dorian, and Sera in the tavern, but Sera skulked away to her nook upstairs. She'd been wary around him the entire time.

Bull raised his tankard. "Good to see you again, Mercy."

"I can't imagine how terrible it must have been being away from us for so long," teased Dorian.

Lavellan snorted and finished the last of his ale, guilt sitting heavy in his stomach despite the light-hearted conversation. Bull was watching him, his one astute eye glinting as he swirled the drink in his hand.

"I didn't wanna bring it up," started Bull, "but that Well thing... What is it, actually? Solas won't give me a straight answer."

"It holds the collective wills of one of our gods' priesthood. All of their knowledge is in the Well and I now know what they do." Lavellan shrugged. "I also hear their voices in my head."

Bull stopped swirling his drink. “What, all the time?”

“I struck a deal with them. For one hour of every day, I’ll listen to everything they have to say. In exchange, they don’t talk as loud in my head and keep it to a really soft whisper so I can focus.”

Dorian frowned. “And does it... influence your person?”

“No,” said Lavellan. “There’s no possession involved. I’m still me.” Whoever that was. He resisted sighing. Hadn’t he already gone through this problem of figuring out who he was? Why’d he have to do it again? “Sorry if I’ve been distant the past few days.”

“We get it,” said Bull. “Running the show is hard. It’s alright, Mercy.”

Mercy. Lavellan had been called many things but that... Somehow, it made him feel the warmest.

“I thought Mercy was just a placeholder until you found a better nickname?” Lavellan asked.

Bull chuckled. “You said it stuck for a reason. Didn’t see a reason to change it as well since it’s true anyway. Unless you want me to call you something else.”

“No, no. Mercy’s... nice. It’s nice. Stick with it.” His gaze and voice softened. “It’s a reminder.”

Bull eyed him but said nothing.

“If you ever find yourself needing a break,” said Dorian, “then come harass me. I’m sure we can get up to no good together.”

“Can I join?” asked Bull.

Dorian sniffed. “I’ll think about it.”

“I’ll give you a kiss.”

Lavellan feigned disgust and covered his ears, scrunched his nose.

Dorian laughed. “Don’t you make that face. I have had to put up with you and Solas throwing each other such pitiful, longing looks for almost a year. *A year!*”

The remark only reminded Lavellan of his and Solas’ current distance. He drank his ale to hide his grimace, but he’d drank it all. Damn.

Lavellan put his tankard back down with a sigh. “I’m going to talk to Sera. I think I’ve scared her with this whole Well business.”

Dorian chuckled. “And he dodges the comment. Fine, off you go. Good luck.”

Lavellan nodded and slipped out of his seat, headed upstairs towards Sera’s nook.

Her door was closed.

“Sera?” he called out. “It’s me. I’m coming in.”

He pushed the door open.

An arrow stared him in the face.

Lavellan glanced at Sera calmly, her face pulled as tight as her bow with fear and caution.

"It's me," said Lavellan.

"Sure, it's what they all say, innit?"

"You secretly like that Varric's nickname for you is Buttercup because it has 'butt' in it."

Sera paused in assessment. Lavellan waited.

Thankfully, she relaxed her bow and threw it into her clutter of things, scowling. "When you say it like that, I sound like an idiot. Fine, you're you. I just had to know, yeah?"

Lavellan quieted, retreating briefly into his memories. This conversation... Hadn't it gone sour last time? Sera had dismissed the things they'd seen in the temple. He wasn't sure he could weather that dismissal from her, not now, not when he'd seen — *lived* — through that past.

He'd been pissed, last time.

"Why're you being so elfy?" she cried.

"Because I'm an elf," he snapped.

No, he really didn't want to relive this conversation.

"Why do you always sink your butt first when things go tits up?" she demanded. "Coryphy-lump shows his sack at Haven, you stay to say hello. You swim in Fade piss then decide to stay there and make us think demons got the chomp on you. And now you hear something called the Well of Sorrows and you say, 'Oh sure, grab a dunk, where's the soap?'" She threw a cushion at him. Lavellan let it hit him square in the face. "I like you as you and I don't want you dead or demon-y."

Well, he didn't want himself demon-y too.

"Friggin' say something!" she said and he realised he'd been standing there quietly, just staring at the ground. "You're all drifty! It's that stupid Well, isn't it? Stupid Well and that stupid temple and those stupid—"

"Don't," he whispered, soft yet sharp. "I don't want to hear you say that. You can think it, but I don't want to hear it. I've never forced *elfy* things onto you because I know how important it is to you that you get your say. But these *elfy* things are important to me. So just... *don't*."

Sera stayed quiet, turned her head away sharply with a sour pull to her lips.

"Thought you could make it make sense," she mumbled after a few beats.

"You want me to tell you what you want to hear. That's different." Lavellan rubbed his face.

"Nothing was simple in that temple. Treating it as simple would be a disservice to you, to me, and to the people who used to live that history."

He had to remember that she was still young, that she was still finding herself and her path. But that didn't mean he had to take shit either. He didn't want to hear her say that all of it were fairy tales, that the gods didn't exist because they *did* and they were there and they were *real*, oh gods, Dirthamen was *real and warm and in my arms*—

"You know where to find me if you need me," he said, barely managed to get the words out before he spun on his heel and left.

Lavellan opened the drawer in his nightstand, took out the box he'd shoved towards the very back, and opened it.

The earring within gleamed gold, the amethyst still beautiful and violet.

He wept.

There was a path that wound down the side of Skyhold, and at the end of that path used to be a dogwood tree that flowered without regard for the season.

Lavellan rediscovered the path, walked its length, and reached the end.

The dogwood tree was dead.

Lavellan collapsed beneath it anyway and rested against it, knocked his head back into the trunk. The earring and the grounding stone were both in his pockets, both different weights.

He still hadn't gone to see Solas.

Because now he had his memories, now the Arbor Wilds were finished.

Now he had to tell the truth.

He opened his palm and focused, pushing and prodding at the Veil to manipulate the Fade and create fire. Sparks sputtered, but no flame. Lavellan scowled and concentrated harder. After a few more tries, in which he only managed to make a brighter than usual spark, Lavellan gave up with an irritated sigh. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the tree.

"You need a staff."

Lavellan's eyes snapped open at the voice.

Solas walked towards him leisurely with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out at the mountains instead of Lavellan. But he left some space between them, didn't advance further.

It wasn't too great of a distance, but it still felt like a ravine.

"A staff for most mages is simply a stabiliser," said Solas. "For us, it will have to be a channel for the Fade to flow through. You *could* cast without it, but you will require time to recover and acclimatise first before you can return to the level that you displayed at the temple." He finally looked at Lavellan, frowning. "But you mustn't attempt something of that magnitude again so soon. That spell could have easily gone wrong and caused a backlash."

He stared at Solas. "By 'us', what do you mean?"

His frown smoothed out. "What do *you* think?" It wasn't a snide remark; simply, a question.

Lavellan didn't answer.

Solas looked away again. "In any case, it seems you have finally found this area."

"Is this where you go when I can't find you?"

"Yes." Melancholy tinted his voice. "That used to be a dogwood tree. It was always in bloom, no matter the season, no matter the weather."

"Has anyone else found it?"

Solas opened his mouth, closed it, frowned again. "You?"

His heart skipped for a moment but then he realised what that meant. "No, I mean, before now."

I told you my name beneath it.

"There may have been a few people, but it has been such a long time."

Lavellan looked down with a disappointed pull to his lips. He wished he could talk to Solas about this, wished he could reminisce with him, wished there was *someone* he could tell this to, someone who'd understand because they'd been there with him. But Solas didn't even remember.

On top of that, there was this damned distance in both proximity and demeanour.

"You've been withdrawn," said Lavellan.

"So have you," he returned.

Guilt tightened around his heart.

"Was the cost of the Well worth it?" asked Solas. "For your power back?"

"Is that why you're so upset? You think I'm doing this for power? It was never about that."

"Of course, I forgot. *Knowledge* is your language, not power."

Lavellan couldn't tell what his mood was. He instinctively searched for Solas' aura, remembered he didn't have any, then gritted his teeth.

"Is that such a problem?" asked Lavellan.

"Seeking power is not the only endeavour to have felled ambitious souls. Seeking knowledge comes a close second."

Indignance rose in him. "I know what I'm doing," said Lavellan. "We've already talked about this."

"Do you truly understand?"

"I do," he said, heavy with meaning. "Perhaps you're the one who doesn't understand."

Solas finally looked at him, something hard in his gaze. "Yes, perhaps."

Lavellan's shoulders raised and tension gathered on them, a familiar response because the look Solas was giving him was indeed that. Familiar.

And how had that ended last time?

His tension left as quick as it came.

Lavellan drew his knees to his chest and looked away.

“No, I don’t want to fight right now,” he said softly. “I’m tired of fighting you.”

Solas said nothing and the breeze swept in between their silence, filling it for them.

“Then I will take my leave,” said Solas, turning to do just that.

“I didn’t say leave. Just fucking tell me what the problem is!”

Solas stopped.

The sight of his back made Lavellan ill.

“Look,” said Lavellan, “I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding you. There’s a storm in my head and I’m just trying to sort it out and I still fall back on avoidance when I’m overwhelmed— Would you fucking look at me, please?”

The desperation that had bled into his voice was almost undignified. Solas looked back at him at least.

Lavellan’s shoulders and face fell in exhaustion. “Stay. I miss you.”

Solas’ stoic expression melted at the request, but he still averted his gaze.

Lavellan waited for his response, tense.

“Ir abelas,” Solas eventually said. “I should not have kept it to myself. I suppose I still fall back on bad habits, too.”

“We’re both still trying.” He shifted and patted the spot beside him. “Keep me company?”

A resigned smile brushed over his lips. “How could I refuse?” he asked and crossed the distance between them, sat beside Lavellan.

Lavellan shuffled closer to him until their arms were pressed against each other. Still, he shuffled even closer. Solas just shot him a mildly unimpressed look.

After a while of Lavellan wriggling to find a comfortable position and Solas making disgruntled sounds as he did, he finally settled between Solas’ legs and leaned back against his chest, head tucked just beneath Solas’ chin.

“The ancient elves had a saying for when you cannot sit still,” said Solas, wrapping his arms around Lavellan. “They say there are worms in your soul.”

Lavellan laughed. He *was* aware of it.

For a while, neither of them said anything. Lavellan counted Solas’ breaths and matched it with his, staring up at the sky through the branches of the dogwood tree.

How simple this was. But this was all he needed right now. Simple.

“Why have you been distant?” asked Lavellan.

Solas sighed. "I suppose I was... worried. I thought perhaps the Well had told you the whole truth of me. That you have come to change your opinion of me and now revile me."

He'd been afraid of being alone again.

"My love for you is not so easily swayed," said Lavellan. The fact that he was here in Solas' arms again even after everything was a testament to that.

And if anything, he now understood just how... taxing it had been for Solas. Mentally, emotionally, physically.

"You mentioned before that the vallaslin hurt to remove in Elvhenan," Lavellan murmured, recalling the faint echoes of that agony. "And you'd removed the vallaslin of so many slaves. All of those distressed people that you had to comfort and care for... It takes a strong will to do that for so long."

Solas said nothing, merely rested his head on Lavellan's.

No wonder Solas had known how to calm Lavellan when he'd descended into fits of distress, had known how to bring him back from visions of his past. And Solas had been a soldier before that, too. War wasn't kind on the mind either and there would have been no shortage of soldiers who'd experienced what Lavellan was going through now.

"I am tired of fighting," Solas admitted softly.

"Me too," he returned, just as soft.

His arms tightened around Lavellan. "But this is my mistake to bear."

"It doesn't hurt to ask for help."

But how had the mistake come to pass in the first place? How did Mythral get murdered? His earring had its clutch again which meant Dirthamen had found the scroll.

Then what?

He couldn't bring himself to ask Solas.

Solas didn't say anything afterwards either. Lavellan suspected that was the end of that conversation.

"[*Adahl'melana enem sul eireth vhenan*](#)^[1]," Lavellan said instead. The beginning to one of Lathanir's poems. Solas' favourite.

Solas lifted his head.

Lavellan waited.

"[*I sulahn'ean dianem danast'an*](#)^[2]," Solas continued, a smile in his voice.

"That's all I know, unfortunately," Lavellan lied. "I'm sure you know the rest better than I do."

"Somehow, I get the impression that you are lying."

Lavellan's lips twitched. "Maybe I just want to hear you reciting poetry out loud. You have a nice voice."

“Do I?” he asked, mildly teasing.

“You know you do, stop teasing me.”

“It was a sincere question. I do not have very strong feelings about my voice.”

“Now who’s lying? Handsome, has a nice voice, resident rebel. I’m sure you were quite attractive in Elvhenan.”

Actually, Lavellan didn’t know. Solas had kept most of his personal life hidden, and Lavellan had never bothered to pry too deeply out of respect and understanding, especially into this area.

“Am I not attractive now?” asked Solas.

“I already called you handsome,” he said with a laugh. “So? Were you popular in Elvhenan?”

“If you are referring to brief dalliances, then somewhat, I suppose.”

Lavellan tipped his head back and stared up at Solas.

“They were nothing more than ways to pass the time,” he continued. “They were not meaningful.”

“Right.”

Solas chuckled and swept some of Lavellan’s hair back. “There is no need to be jealous.”

Lavellan tipped his head back down. “I’m not.”

“Of course,” said Solas in that infuriating, mollifying tone of his. “But I am being sincere. Had you been in Elvhenan, you best believe I would have been taken with you and would have loved no other.”

He scoffed, face warming. “What if we weren’t on good terms and were always fighting?”

“Then I would have lamented that I cannot help but still think you captivating during arguments. Perhaps I would have even attempted to bridge the rift between us.”

“Will you come see a play with me?”

Lavellan turned slightly so he could look at Solas better, intrigued. “And then? What if I accept and we end up on better terms?”

“Then I would have been in trouble.” He smiled. “Because then, I would no longer have an excuse to keep you at a distance.”

“What if I’m a terrible person in Elvhenan? What if our values clashed? Maybe I was Elgar’nan’s grubby little lackey.”

“You would not have stood for that,” he said with a conviction that took Lavellan aback. His gaze matched that conviction too.

Lavellan huffed out a fond laugh. “Alright, so are you saying that even if we were in Elvhenan, you would have still ended up loving me?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Don’t say anything you don’t mean.”

Solas looked at him solemnly. “I am being sincere.”

Lavellan met his gaze, uncertain of how to respond. “Then what would you have done?” he asked. “Would you have vied for my affections?”

“Knowing me, I would have suffered in silence. Being associated with me would have put you in danger. I had many enemies, watching for my weakness.” He tucked a strand of Lavellan’s hair behind his ear. “And I do not doubt that you would have had better options to choose from.”

The look Solas always got in his eyes whenever he saw Lavellan... Lavellan hadn’t known what it was back then but...

Oh.

“Oh, you fool,” Lavellan whispered and kissed him.

What would have happened if Solas had been more overt? If he’d been more transparent about his emotions? What would Lavellan have done?

Maybe, given more time, he would have come to love Solas too. Perhaps he’d already been there and just hadn’t realised it. Maybe he could have spoken to Dirthamen about it, could have asked if he would be amenable to opening the relationship. Then he could have asked Solas if he was alright with that. Maybe they would have agreed, maybe not. But the point was that they could have had the option.

Could have.

They could have had that.

Solas cupped the side of Lavellan’s neck and deepened the kiss.

If only they hadn’t been burdened with the weight of an empire.

If only they had the time.

If only.

Lavellan sat in the quiet of his room and turned the earring over in his hand.

He had to meet Asunara and ask. It was likely that she knew of what had gone down. And for that, he’d need a Dreamer. Although, technically, he could be counted as a Dreamer now. But he still didn’t know how to look.

He tucked the earring back into an inner pocket and left.

But when he opened his door, Ellana was already there, hand poised to knock.

“Oh,” he said and smiled. “I was about to look for you, actually. But you go first, it looks important.”

She lowered her hand and he let her in.

“The book is on its way,” she said as they ascended the stairs.

His smile vanished. “The Keeper agreed?”

“I contacted her in her dream last night because she didn’t respond to my first letter.” She sat on the arm of the couch. “But she said she’d already given the book to an Inquisition agent. It should arrive soon. It looked like she was expecting the request.”

His breath hitched.

“But she wants to talk to you first,” said Ellana. “She said she has something she wants to ask.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

He chewed on his lip. “Alright.”

Ellana led him through the Fade, her staff glowing as it showed them the way. He absentmindedly started changing the scenery around him again.

She whacked his arm lightly. “Stop it. You’ll attract demons.”

“You’re raining on my parade,” he said and turned the weather rainy, but the droplets didn’t get them wet.

“I hate you.”

He laughed and stopped changing the surroundings.

“Do you know what the Keeper wants to talk to me about?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but she looked very serious. She had that face. You know the one? She makes it when we get in trouble?”

He pressed his lips into a thin line. Not very reassuring.

Eventually, Ellana stopped walking. The air before them briefly shimmered silver, and Lavellan felt the weak presence of a boundary.

“Ready?” asked Ellana.

At his nod, she put her hand on the boundary and gently prised it open with a spell.

They stepped into the dream.

In which Lavellan actually learns a lesson and starts spending time with friends again.
We love to see it.

Solas: yeah i would've had a fat crush on you and would've NEVER told u
Lavellan, re-evaluating every interaction they've ever shared: hang on a fucki ng
momnet--

Imagine arguing with your crush only for them to die and that's your final conversation
with them

Yall ever just try to write poetry in Elvish? Don't do it. Writing poems in English is
hard enough T^T

Translation

[1] **Adahl'melana enem sul eireth vhenan:** Spring dawned for a wintered heart [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **I sulahn'ean dianem danast'an:** And birdsong filled the broken space [\[↑\]](#)

Of uncertain futures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

bring him home

The Keeper was dreaming of a large meadow dotted with patches of dandelions. They found her sitting beneath a lone tree, twirling one of the dandelions between her fingers.

“I just have to make her lucid,” said Ellana. “Hold on.”

“Wait,” he said and conjured a mirror to change his appearance. His hair grew longer and his face turned younger, mimicking his appearance from six, no, *seven* years ago.

His reflection gave him pause.

“Wow,” he said morosely.

He couldn’t recognise the man staring back. Had he looked like that before?

“He looks like a fool,” said Lavellan.

Ellana stood beside him and pulled his hair back from his shoulders. “He looks like someone who shouldn’t have gone through the things he did. Be kind.”

Lavellan looked away and the mirror vanished.

“You can’t fool the Keeper forever, you know?” said Ellana.

“I know,” he murmured.

Ellana patted his arm then approached Keeper Deshanna and greeted her. She placed her hand on the Keeper’s shoulder.

The dandelion in the Keeper’s hand became the seed head. Tufts of white blew away in the breeze.

Keeper Deshanna turned to look at Lavellan.

Lavellan waved awkwardly.

She put the now seedless stem down and made her way towards him. Before he could open his mouth to greet her, she pulled him into a tight hug.

Lavellan relaxed into it and hugged her back, gripping her robes tightly.

“Foolish boy,” she chided but her tone was absent of any reprimand. “You left without even saying goodbye then you go and make me worry about you at every turn. I’m not getting any younger.”

He mumbled a guilty apology.

“Let me have a proper look at you,” she said and drew back, cupping his face. The Keeper was no longer as exuberant as she’d been in her youth, and the curious glimmer in her eyes had honed and matured into wisdom, but she still held a sprightly air. She frowned. “You think you can fool me?”

No leader looks this rested. You're always trying not to worry those around you." She turned to Ellana. "Put him back."

Ellana and Lavellan shared a look, then she cleared her throat and dragged Lavellan away, made it look as if she was the one undoing the transformation while Lavellan did it himself. But he kept his hair long. He'd missed it. When they returned to the Keeper, her face grew grim, but she nodded.

"Have you been sleeping well?" the Keeper asked.

"No," he mumbled.

"Eating?"

He didn't need to eat as much anymore, able to draw on the Fade for sustenance. That counted as eating well, right?

"Yes," he answered.

"Good."

"Ellana said you wanted to talk to me," he said before she could interrogate him further about his health. The Keeper narrowed her eyes at his attempt to change the subject, but she indulged him.

"I did," she said. "I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?"

The Keeper paused in thought. Lavellan fiddled with the edges of his sleeve while he waited.

"I thought I would do something clever," Keeper Deshanna eventually said. "A little ruse to trip you up into the truth. But I have grown far too old for tricks so I will ask directly." She looked into his eyes. "Are you connected in some way to Clan Lavellan's guardian?"

Lavellan stared.

A cloud passed over the sun and doused them with shade.

He smiled. "You've always been sharp, Keeper."

She let out a short, shocked breath. "I had a feeling. The guardian disappeared after you were born. I hadn't been sure what the connection was. I suspected the guardian had saved you in some way, but I didn't tell your mother. I didn't want her to feel guilty."

He shook his head. "It was nobody's fault. Do you remember when the baby was born? There was a heartbeat, but no cries. The body was alive, but there no longer was a soul."

Her face fell. "What do you mean?"

Lavellan carefully explained the relationship between souls and the body and the circumstances of Mahanon's birth. After the explanation, he said, "I made a choice. I risked it and entered the body, and then I lost my memories. I've only recently recovered them." He couldn't meet her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not who you thought I was."

The Keeper fell quiet.

Was she angry? Disappointed? Disgusted? Betrayed?

“You are exactly who I thought you were,” she said, and his eyes snapped up. Her gaze was gentle. “Even now, when you are so far away and dealing with problems of your own, you still guard us, guide us.”

“I’m not Mahanon,” he protested. “I took his name and his body—”

She put her hands on either side of his face and squished slightly, clicked her tongue. “Foolish boy. You said it yourself — the soul had left the body. And while that is a great tragedy, you took a risk and crossed, all because you couldn’t bear to see your mother in pain. Now you listen to me.” She tipped his head down so she could better look him in the eye. “Are you listening?”

He nodded, cowed by her intense stare. There was a reason why the kids were afraid of her.

“You did not steal anybody’s future or life. There was *no* future for the baby because the baby had passed. But you gave your parents, yourself, and the clan a future. We were able to make space in our hearts for another member of the family instead of suffering a heartache. It was *you* who we watched grow. *You* were the little boy who went around asking if you could braid people’s hair so that you could surprise your mother and do it for her. *You* were the little boy who stuffed his face with honeyed bread. *You* were the little boy who incessantly asked for stories and worried us all by asking an awful lot about the Dread Wolf.”

Lavellan cracked a small smile.

“*You* were the little boy who talked big yet cried when he found a snail under his shirt.”

“Keeper!” he shrieked, face heating at the memory. Ellana cackled.

She smiled. “*You* were the little boy who forced himself to grow up too fast to take care of his family, you trained every day without relent, you stepped up to become the Warleader, made yourself kill to protect us and hid in the forest after because you didn’t want us to see how distressed it made you.” Her eyes saddened. “You offered to go to the Conclave in your sister’s place. You take up the frontlines of this gods-forsaken military and political war. Da’len, that was all you. They were your choices, your actions. *You* are Mahanon.”

His eyes watered.

“You are our family,” said the Keeper. “Never forget that. Respect your past, but do not neglect your present and future.”

Lavellan bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from crying. The Keeper patted his cheek lightly.

“Always had a soft heart, you,” she said.

“I think most people would call that weak,” he mumbled, swallowing the lump in his throat.

“You show me to those people and I’ll put my staff through their teeth. You don’t listen to those people, hear me?” She tapped her finger over his heart. “Soft isn’t weak. Be kind, but never defer. Who are we, Mahanon?”

“We are the Dalish,” he whispered.

“Who are we?”

“The Dalish,” he said again, louder, pride stirring in his heart.

Keeper Deshanna nodded and patted his chest firmly. "Be soft-hearted and be proud. Because I am. Proud of you, of all you have done." She pulled him down and pressed their foreheads together. "Thank you for everything. Thank you for the guidance, for the protection, for your care and for your love."

"Keeper, I'm going to cry," he said, voice already thick.

"Then cry, Mahanon."

He cried.

Keeper Deshanna held him through it. Ellana hugged him from behind.

He cried out his soft, proud heart, knowing that home was here to catch him now.

The cloud that had been hiding the sun earlier finally passed and showered them with sunshine.

After he exhausted his tears, Lavellan realised he was bent an almost uncomfortable amount just so he could cry on the Keeper's shoulder.

"Tall lad, you are," Keeper Deshanna mused and ruffled his hair fondly. He laughed weakly and drew himself back, wiped his tears. "Come, come," she urged. "Let's walk through the meadow. Tell me what you two have been up to."

Lavellan stuck to a recount of the events after the Temple of Sacred Ashes and Ellana chimed in with her own discoveries.

As he'd suspected though, the Keeper was the most interested about the Temple of Mythal and the Well of Sorrows,

"The Arlathvhen is next year," said the Keeper. "Da'len if you can, please come and share your findings. This is... monumental, I would say. I cannot even begin to describe how life-changing the information you now hold is."

"Of course," he promised. "I've been writing things down too. And I could answer questions."

The Arlathvhen. He hadn't attended in the past timeline. It would have been a painful reminder of his loss, and it would have strengthened the guilt in his stomach since Clan Lavellan had so much collected lore. Not only did he get his entire family killed, but he also lost so much of their people's history on top of that. How could he have shown his face then? Especially since he'd felt so disconnected from his culture, had allowed himself to be moulded to fit everyone's vision of a perfect Herald.

And then he'd regretted not going but what was another regret to add to his list?

"I *am* curious about this elven castle you found as well," said Keeper Deshanna. "Skyhold, is it? That's a shem name. I imagine it has an elven name. Do you know it?"

"...Tarasyl'an," Lavellan said. He omitted the Te'las part. *The place where the sky was held back* might tip the Keeper off. Better it remained *the place where the sky dwells*.

"Do you know its history?"

"It's ancient."

She chuckled. "Well, yes, of course. But do you know who owned it? What it was once used for?"

Lavellan looked to Ellana for help. He had too much difficulty lying to the Keeper.

Problem was, all of the children who'd grown up under Keeper Deshanna's watch had trouble lying to her so Ellana was in the same boat.

Their silence was too long.

Keeper Deshanna frowned, glanced at Ellana. "Lana, surely you've dreamt there. Do you know?"

"Ancient magic has seeped within the walls," said Ellana.

The Keeper waited for her to elaborate but she didn't. Her frown turned confused.

"What's wrong with you two?" she asked.

"The owner was proud," said Lavellan, offering a morsel to appease her, "and impulsive, but caring. The castle had no throne and it was built to be cold and empty because this young lord wished to be left alone. But some of the lord's loyal soldiers still dwelled within the castle with him."

The Keeper nodded. "Interesting. Although, I don't understand why you two were so hesitant. Were you able to ascertain the young lord's name? I would like to write this down when I wake up."

Just say no, you don't. Or no. Just one word.

Lavellan glanced at Ellana. *You do it!*

She looked back. *Why me? You do it!*

Keeper Deshanna stopped walking. Her frown had turned stern.

"You're hiding something," she said. "Tell me."

He sighed, resigned. "Only if you promise not to yell."

She shot him a wary look. "Go on."

"You wouldn't," said Ellana, half in taunting, half in disbelief.

"When I was lost after the avalanche," he started, "I told you I managed to find the others again, but I didn't tell you how. Because I was being guided. By howling wolves."

Keeper Deshanna stared at him.

"I met Fen'Harel. The castle was once his. He let us stay there for shelter."

Her brows raised. "And you're certain it was him?"

"I can confirm," said Ellana.

"What did he want for the castle?" she asked. "What price did he exact?"

"None," said Lavellan.

"None?"

“It was a gift.”

“Fen’Harel does not give *gifts* without reason,” she said.

“Alright, well, he wanted the Inquisition to recover because he also wants to see Corypheus vanquished.”

“*Why?*”

“Because Corypheus took something of Fen’Harel’s while Fen’Harel was asleep.”

Her brows raised even higher. “He *stole* from the Dread Wolf.”

Not... quite. “Something like that.”

“And where is he now?” asked Keeper Deshanna. “Did he just vanish after?”

“Not exactly. We’re working together.”

“Mythal’s motherfucking mercy,” the Keeper said beneath her breath and Lavellan almost laughed, had never heard the Keeper swear before. Not as Mahanon, anyway.

Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. “And he may be... sort of... my lover?”

Keeper Deshanna stared, jaw falling slightly. She glanced at Ellana as if determining whether this was a trick, but Ellana was grimacing.

“Mahanon,” said Keeper Deshanna, “this is not funny.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed and hurriedly raised his hands up in placation. “He’s actually very nice! I promise! The entire situation with the gods getting locked away is a little complicated and he’s not a perfect man by any means but he’s not malicious— No, no, don’t pinch my ear!”

She tried to grab his ear and he ducked. “Love is blind, boy!”

“This love isn’t,” he protested as he backed away from her. “And I’m older than you.”

“Then act your age!”

“You promised not to yell!”

Two sore ears later, Lavellan sat with a grumble as he rubbed feeling back into them.

“Your mother is rolling in her grave,” the Keeper sighed. “I knew you liked the stories, but I didn’t expect this.”

“I didn’t fall in love with the man in the stories, Keeper. I fell in love with the man beneath them. Despite them.”

“The stories are there for a reason, da’len. He is still someone you must be wary of.”

Lavellan sighed. “I know, but what kind of stories have you heard about the Inquisitor, Keeper?”

How exaggerated are they? How true to me are they?"

She frowned but said nothing.

"He's—" Lavellan looked down and clenched his hands into fists. "He's not perfect. I swear, I know that more than anyone. We fought a lot, and still do sometimes, but he has a soft heart, too. If you get to know him beyond Fen'Harel, you'll see what I mean. I love him, and I will not be ashamed of him."

Another breeze swept past and carried his declaration through the meadow.

"And I want to bring him home," he continued, unable to stop himself from saying it, then paused at the absurdity of that statement. Bring Solas home? Was that even something he could do? Was that attainable? "If the future permits it," he amended. "If I take him to meet the rest of Clan Lavellan, please treat him like family. At the very least, an honoured guest. Just give him a chance. That's all I'm asking."

Her frown deepened.

He knew more than anyone that Solas wasn't perfect. He knew more than anyone how painful it was to love him. He knew more than anyone how stupid of a risk it was to love him again.

Then again, he'd always been all for second chances.

But this was the last chance he was willing to give. Any more and he may just break.

What if you're the one who fucks it up this time?

His clenched fists tightened, nails digging into his palms.

Nothing lasts. Bring him home? Laughable. Can you keep him long enough?

"He's important to you," Keeper Deshanna murmured.

Lavellan blinked himself out of those unpleasant thoughts and looked up at her. Her eyes were softer.

She let out a weary sigh. "Alright, da'len. If this is important to you, then it is important for me, too. If you bring him home, we will behave according to how he treats us. We will meet respect with respect."

Hope filled his chest.

"But you *will* come home, with or without the Dread Wolf," she said. "Whenever you get the opportunity to."

"I will, even if I have to crawl." He hugged her. "Thank you," he whispered.

She patted his back. "Tell your wolf he has hundreds of in-laws to impress."

Lavellan laughed. "I think he'd drop dead on the spot in fright."

“Can I bring you home?” was Lavellan’s greeting when Solas entered their room.

Solas stopped on top of the stairs, staring at Lavellan.

“Home?” asked Solas.

“To Clan Lavellan,” he elaborated and sat on the edge of his bed. “Once this is all over. To introduce you to my family.”

Silence elapsed. An unasked question was still hovering above them, yet here Lavellan was, asking a different question about a future that didn’t seem to have a place within their circumstance.

But it was also a question he’d never had the opportunity to voice. There had been no home to take Solas to before.

“Would you like the truthful or optimistic answer?” asked Solas.

“Both.”

Solas sat beside him tentatively. “Optimistically, yes. Truthfully... I don’t know.”

“Will you forgive me for clinging to the optimistic answer?”

His eyes softened. “I could never fault you for that.” He looked away briefly, then looked back at Lavellan with a small smile. “Tell me then. What do you plan to do if you do take me to your clan? How will they take the news of you being amorously involved with the Dread Wolf?”

“Amorously involved,” Lavellan laughed. “I don’t have to imagine. Ellana helped me meet our Keeper in a dream. I told the Keeper we were lovers because I can never seem to lie to her. She pinched my ear. She said you had hundreds of in-laws to impress.”

Solas stared, said nothing.

Then he stood. “Perhaps the truthful answer was better.”

Lavellan grinned and grabbed his hand, tugged him back. “No, come back. I’ll help you cheat.”

He managed to pull Solas back and chattered for a long time about this hypothetical future of theirs. They both knew it was a distraction from the reality of their impending future, the uncertain outcomes, the unanswered and unasked questions, but the distraction was still a welcome one. It let them pretend.

Playing pretend was always so comforting.

He ignored the earring pressing into his chest from inside his pocket, ignored the weight of the grounding stone in the other pocket.

The wind howled in his ears atop the battlements as he looked out over the Frostbacks, lost in his thoughts. He tightened the Dalish scarf around his neck and swept his hair away from his eyes. His hair was past his shoulders now. Just a few more months and he could braid his hair again.

Smoke flashed in his periphery.

“Two hearts hurting and heaving,” said Cole. “Their beat is calling. You’re not answering.”

“On their own, what I felt was already formidable.” Lavellan chuckled hollowly. “Both of them? I wouldn’t survive. It’s a frightening thing, Cole. To love.”

“But then, it’s worse when you let it go after you’ve had it. A lot of people hurt that way.” He frowned. “Why don’t you just keep holding it?”

Lavellan looked down. “It also hurts when it slips away even after you’ve held it as hard as you can.”

“Maybe it’s different this time. You can make it different.” Cole picked at the edges of his sleeve. “You shouldn’t make him wait, either.”

“Is it my turn for this lecture?” he asked with a small smile.

“Solas wants to hold you, but he thinks he’s not supposed to hold a sun. You both think you’re holding something not meant to stay.”

Cole disappeared.

Lavellan stared at the space he used to occupy and got the sense that Cole was upset with him. He fiddled with the edges of the scarf with a small frown.

Cole was right, he shouldn’t keep Solas waiting. He just had to get it over and done with.

But there was so... *much*.

“Pick up each individual article of clothing, and little by little, the mound gets smaller and the clothes get washed. You don’t have to offload everything at once or try to tackle it all at once.”

But there was still that problem with Solas’ memory. Maybe Lavellan could probe a little, determine which memories had been damaged first. Maybe Asunara would know.

Armoured footsteps approached him.

“Your Worship!”

Lavellan turned. The soldier saluted.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Worship, the Sentinels have arrived through the mirror. They said they wished to seek an audience with you.”

The Sentinels filed into the War Room. Small numbers. He’d hazard a guess that there were only about twenty of them present.

“How many did you lose during the battle?” asked Lavellan.

“We lost three quarters,” said Abelas and Lavellan let out a punched breath. “Only thirty of us survived the latest invasion.”

Lavellan hung his head. “Ir abelas.”

Abelas nodded, eyes slightly dull from weariness. “Just under twenty have followed me here. The rest have chosen to seek their fates elsewhere.”

Lavellan leaned on the table and regarded the small group, meeting a few wary gazes. “You all know who I am?”

“Ras’virelan,” said one, pale and freckled, two braids spilling out of his hood. “The reincarnation of the heretic who attempted to steal the gods’ knowledge.”

It would have sounded insulting if it hadn’t been delivered in such a factual tone. It wasn’t wrong either. He did try to steal the scroll.

“Correct.” He straightened back up. “If you knew this, then why have you come here?”

“We are lost in a world that has forgotten us,” said Abelas. “There is nothing left for us to defend. We are aimless.”

“So you come here seeking purpose?”

“Yes.”

“As he has said—” Lavellan nodded at the Sentinel who’d called him a heretic— “I’m the heretic and thief, and this is Fen’Harel’s castle. Why come to us for purpose?”

“Our leader believes there is good in you,” said the Sentinel from earlier. He must be of a relatively high rank if he was representing the others. “And we trust in his judgement. Some of us have also seen the good that the El’amelan has done. Besides, you and the Dread Wolf are the only other ones left of the People.”

“Ah,” said Lavellan, clasping his hands behind his back. “You seek kinship too.” He looked at each Sentinel, studying them, then tried to recall how many Dalish were within Skyhold at the moment. “What if the purpose I gave you was to study history? Who would be opposed to that? Be honest.”

The Sentinels looked at one another. Abelas frowned.

“Ras,” said Abelas, “we have watched events from the Fade as we slept. We are aware of what has happened.”

“If a human were to have witnessed the fall of Elvhenan from the Fade, do you think they would understand the pain and the loss that the People felt?”

“Of course not,” said a Sentinel.

Lavellan turned to that Sentinel. A woman with dark skin and darker eyes. “How come?”

“It will be disconnected,” she said. “They have not gone through it themselves. They were not a part of the People.”

“If they spoke to a survivor, do you think their understanding would increase?”

She frowned. "Possibly. But it will never be true understanding."

"But now that it was made real, now that they have seen a person who has gone through that horror, does the event suddenly become something more than a distant tragedy?"

She and a few other Sentinels looked down in thought. It was a relief that they seemed to be receptive to him at least. Perhaps because the ones who wouldn't be had already gone.

"That's what I'm hoping to accomplish," said Lavellan. "It's good that you've seen it. But now it's time to make it real, and I want to start with the Dalish."

A few heads snapped up at that.

"To us, the fall of Elvhenan was nothing more than a distant tragedy either," he continued. "Although, it was also a touch more personal because that is our ancestry. But to you, the future after that fall, this present, is a distant nightmare. I'm hoping that gap can be bridged. My hope is to assign each of you to a Dalish who is well-versed in our lore so that you may learn from one another."

They shared uneasy looks.

There were eighteen of them and not as many Dalish in Skyhold. He could call for more Dalish Firsts or Seconds from other clans. They would be excited to meet an ancient elf, although he would have to warn them that it wouldn't be easy and the receptiveness may vary.

"If we decline?" asked a Sentinel.

"While that is a disappointing outcome, I'm not here to force you. Simply, you came here for a purpose, this is the purpose I'm offering. If you wish to take it, it's there." He rubbed his eyes. "I'll give you all time to think about it. In the meantime, if you're low on supplies, we can send some through the eluvian."

A few Sentinels seemed eager about this new purpose and this new world at least, so that was promising.

"I will stay," said Abelas. "And I will attempt this purpose you wish for us."

Lavellan's brows raised. "You don't want to think about it?"

"I will give them the model to base their decision on. And you can perhaps perfect the system and how you wish to go about it with me."

That made sense, he supposed.

"Then that's the plan for now," said Lavellan.

He escorted them back to the eluvian, but Abelas stayed behind. If he was going to start studying here, Lavellan should ready accommodations for him.

Abelas turned to Lavellan with a dubious look.

"Are you certain you do not wish for us to do something else?" asked Abelas.

Lavellan smiled. "I thought you were willing to try it?"

"That, I am. However, we are fighters. Would it not be more useful to assign us to a task related to

it?”

“You’ve all been fighting for so long. That’s exhausting. There’s no shortage of things that could go wrong and I’m sure you’ll all be called to fight again, but for now, take advantage of the lull to learn about this world.” He stared out of the eluvian chamber’s door at the garden. “Think of it this way: the more you know of this world, the better equipped you are to fight within it.”

“You are merely trying to placate me.”

“Is it working?”

Abelas sighed.

Lavellan grinned and took that as a yes. They walked out of room and regarded the garden.

“Who did you have in mind, then?” asked Abelas

He hummed. “Not sure yet.”

Abelas wasn’t one who was easily swayed, but he admired loyalty and steadfastness in others and would be more likely to listen to people with such traits. So Lavellan needed someone with those characteristics, and someone who was relatively good with understanding people, someone who wouldn’t be put off by the lack of receptiveness.

Most of all, someone who could form a connection with Abelas. Abelas needed someone to ground him to this world. Someone besides Lavellan.

Lavellan’s gaze fell on the person walking across the garden, book in one hand, staff on her back.

“Actually,” said Lavellan. “I think I do have someone in mind.”

Ellana sat on the bench and opened her book, unassuming.

A few hours later, he knocked on the door of the small library below the Hall.

“Lana?” he asked. “Are you inside?”

Ellana opened the door and let him in. She’d turned the small library into a nicer space. No cobwebs, no eerie lighting, and the old books had been replaced.

“Saw the Sentinels came a while ago,” she said.

He told her of his plan and she nodded along.

“So who were you thinking of partnering Abelas with?” she asked.

He stared at her.

She blinked, then raised her hands up. “No.”

“Learn from one another.”

“You want me to babysit him.”

“Not babysit.”

“No, no. *Ellana, please babysit this ancient elf and show him we all aren't heathens.* That's the gist of your request. You want me to... what? Convince him we're people? Why's that my job? I have better things to do with my time. Won't he listen to you better?”

“I can't be sure that he's listening because it's sinking in or if he's listening because he thinks he's obligated to give me the answer I'm looking for.” He sat on the edge of her desk and smiled.

“Besides, I never said anything about convincing. I just think if there's anyone who can guide him but also stand their ground, it's you. Remember the friend system we had in the clan?”

“When we were young and had a designated older hunter to show us the ropes for a day? I remember.”

“Think of it like that. You two are the only ones I can trust with the other.” He paused, considering Ellana's temperament. She was patient, but her limit was much lower than his, and he knew how challenging ancient elves could be. “Try not to kill him, please. I just got him back.”

“No promises.”

He laughed. This was going to be interesting to watch unfold.

“By the way,” he said since he was already here, “can you teach me how to contact specific spirits while dreaming?”

Chapter End Notes

STOP. BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING. PLEASE READ THIS [FANFICTION OF A FANFICTION](#) THAT CLEARAUTUMNVIBES WROTE. IF YOU'RE A DIRTHAVELLAS SHIPPER, THIS IS THE FIC TO READ. Pspspspsspsps Sad Elf Sandwich come get it here.

Also, I finally wrote a [Dirthamen POV](#) come get it if you want it/miss Dirthy.

COLE I'VE MISSED YOU.

Lavellan trying to re-establish his authority but he's already vomited on Keeper Deshanna when he was a baby. Buddy, that ship has sailed. You'll always be Child in her eyes now.

unrelated but i got my fuckin wisdom teeth removed a few days ago and wisdom tooth my ass. i didn't feel any wiser, i was just in pain.

Memories of ocean blue

Chapter Notes

Self-care checkpoint! :D

Happy Pride month yall Last Pride month, we were up to Redcliffe. And now, here we are. Whack

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

murals in the mournful moonlight

Solas was sound asleep beside him.

Lavellan got out of bed, slipping out of Solas' arms carefully so he wouldn't wake him, and paused, staring down at Solas' serene expression.

Soon, Lavellan promised himself. He'd tell Solas soon.

He kissed Solas' cheek, strapped his daggers to his hips, then left, grabbing the raven cloak on the couch and wrapping it around him on the way.

Skyhold was already asleep, blind to their Inquisitor stalking his way through the darkness towards Morrigan's eluvian. Upon reaching the room, he softly closed the door behind him and stopped in front of the mirror.

Ellana had said that one method to find a spirit was to dream in an area that the spirit had great connection to. The only place he could think of that may still be accessible was the El'amelan's fortress. He didn't know what had become of it, but it was worth a try.

Lavellan placed a hand on the eluvian and focused, grasped the threads of change within.

This wouldn't require his magic. Controlling the essence of change that June had harnessed within the eluvians tied to his spirit abilities.

He murmured the El'amelan's pass.

“[*Nydh'uthimasha*](#).^[1]”

The surface burst with purple light. He sighed in relief.

Morrigan wouldn't be able to sense that the eluvian had opened since it technically wasn't opening into her network. The problem would be returning. He could redirect any eluvian to her network again since he was also a walking keystone for her network, but she would sense it that time. Although, he doubted he'd be questioned because soldiers and Sentinels have been coming and going through the eluvian lately.

Lavellan stepped through.

The El'amelan's network was as he recalled, the realm perpetually set at dusk, stone paths converging towards the central platform he was standing on. However, some of the stone paths had crumbled into the golden waters. The weeping willows had lost their leaves. The eluvians within sight were either cracked or dull.

He turned and faced the central eluvian he'd come out of.

His eyes widened.

A rose made of ice had been left beside it.

Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat and picked it up. After all these years, it had survived. A rose for a girl he'd failed. Who'd put this here?

He carried it close to him as he reopened the central eluvian and stepped through into the El'amelan's courtyard.

Thousands of years had passed, so he'd expected that the fortress in his memories wouldn't match the fortress of now, but it was still a punch to the gut when he arrived.

Lavellan stood in the desolate courtyard, surrounded by wreckage and debris illuminated by the moonlight, not unlike the state that Skyhold had been in when they'd first arrived. Most of the fortress still stood, but there were large sections that had collapsed.

It was quiet. The mountain air howled.

Lavellan stepped over the wreckage with a heavy, aching heart.

Nature had begun to overtake certain areas, stones almost lost beneath vines and moss. Time had taken its due. It had stood for four thousand years and yet it had crumbled in half of that time.

As always, the business of destruction was swift and merciless. Empires could be built over centuries and yet fall in minutes.

Maybe he could give that *friendly* warning to Tevinter and Orlais.

A rumbling sound echoed behind him.

Lavellan whipped around, hands resting on his daggers' hilts.

Something burst from the wreckage. Five segmented legs made of twisted wood and stone lifted a large yet thin body off the ground, its eyeless head boasting a mouth with fangs of stone.

Varterral.

It bounded towards him, kicked up chunks of stone along the way.

Lavellan sighed.

[“Da'gavelan, venavis^{\[2\]}!”](#) he snapped.

The varterral, Da'gavelan, halted immediately.

It stood there for a moment, as if uncertain, then it lowered its thin body and hovered its large, eyeless head close to Lavellan in curiosity. He patted its head, recalled the song Vedir would sing to calm it down, and hummed it.

At the familiar tune, its hostility faded. Da'gavelan tucked its legs back beneath itself and lowered itself fully, the wood and stone of its body creaking and grinding.

"Still defending this old place, huh?" he asked.

Seeing Da'gavelan again just reminded him of Vedir. Vedir had absolutely loved this varterral.

"How come you get to call it Little Biter, but you reject my suggestion to call it Ugly?" asked Lavellan.

Vedir made an offended sound. "Little Biter is cute and deadly. Ugly's just insulting."

Lavellan smiled. "You're still ugly. Good grief. Never let Dirthamen create anything. He'll either drown it in black or make it look terrifying."

Da'gavelan shuffled, tried to burrow back beneath the rubble. Lavellan gave it a final pat then moved along. He'd go inside the fortress, but it'd be too dark and probably empty and it would likely just depress him further, so he wandered outside beneath the moonlight and searched for a safe place to sleep instead. He lamented the long-gone gardens on the way. Those gardens had been maintained so beautifully because his Master of Assassins had taken up gardening to relieve stress.

He missed the El'amelan.

Lavellan entered one of the smaller courtyards. A crumbling fountain stood neglected in the centre, the hedges that had lined the path so pristinely now nothing but shrivelled clumps.

He stopped at the sight of the far wall.

A fresco had been painted on it.

That... hadn't been there before. At least, not while he'd been alive.

Lavellan neared it, clutching the ice rose tighter to his chest. The colours had faded now and there were cracks in the paint, but Lavellan would recognise that style anywhere.

Solas had painted it.

The fresco depicted a central figure shrouded in a starry robe that flared out like wings. Their face was obscured by their hood, their hands cradling a patterned, golden orb of light close to their heart, the orb blazing like a violent sun. The area around the figure was surrounded by vibrant mosaic, painted to mimic stained glass, but the colours faded the further they were from the figure. As if bleached of life.

It may have been animated before, but the Veil had rendered it stationary.

Warmth stung Lavellan's eyes as he put a hand upon it, brushing gentle fingers over it. The figure had been painted so carefully, but the brushstrokes at the edges of the mural were more violent, as if the painter had carelessly slashed the brush over it.

He touched his forehead upon the mural, heart aching.

Solas had mourned him.

Solas had loved him.

A few stray tears escaped, but he wiped them away, sat against the mural.

That was how he fell asleep — sitting beneath a forgotten fresco with an unmelting rose in hand and the moonlight draped over him like a blanket.

In the Fade, the fortress had been restored to its former glory. The flowers along the walls were blooming once again, the fountain bubbling with whispered secrets, the air holding the impressions of long-gone laughter.

Lavellan didn't have to search for long.

The moment he opened the large doors into the fortress, there was a spirit waiting for him in the wide and large entry hall. Its back was turned to him, ocean blue light radiating within its form. The faint ends of its robes didn't quite touch the ground.

"Hello, Nara," he said.

Asunara lifted her head and whirled around.

They stared at one another. Lavellan smiled, vision blurring with tears as he opened his arms.

Asunara flew into them.

By the time she was in his arms, her form had solidified and gained colour, had assumed her Elvhen form. He wrapped his arms tight around her. She trembled against him.

"It's alright," he soothed. "I'm here. You've done so well. Thank you."

Asunara clung tighter to him. "I'm sorry, I've made so many mistakes and now I've— I've caused you so much pain."

"The time reversal was a good call. You did so well with what limited time and resources you had." He rested his hand at the back of her head. "And I wanted to thank you. For heeding my message and watching over the world. I'm sorry if it's burdened you unnecessarily." He should've just told them to live their life in whatever manner they wished to live it instead of imparting them with such a large undertaking.

They held onto each other for a long time, neither willing to be the first to let go.

It was Asunara who hesitantly stepped back to recompose herself, tucking the short strands of her hair behind her ears and wiping her tears.

"I thought you might come looking for me soon," she said, "so I lingered near the fortress. I had a suspicion this would be the first place you would go to."

His gaze saddened as he swept it across the large hall.

"It's a ruin now," he said.

"I've managed to preserve the memories within the fortress." She clasped her hands in front of her and looked up at the ceiling. "I used to watch them all the time."

“Used to?”

“I had to stop.” She smiled dryly. “I could feel the grip of Nostalgia. Being corrupted was the last thing I wanted.”

“Ah,” he murmured.

“Did you find the rose Vedir had left in the network?”

His heart warmed. “So it was Vedir? I did, yes.”

“And what of Abelas? Have you two spoken again since the temple?”

“We have. I’ve saddled him with studying.”

Asunara laughed mildly. “Maybe I’ll visit one day just to see him in pain.”

“You should. Not just to see him in pain, I mean. As in visit from time to time. I have a spirit of Compassion with me, I’m sure he’d be thrilled to talk to you.”

“It... *has* been a little lonely,” she mumbled. She flashed him a smile and held out a hand. “Would you like to walk with me again? For old times’ sake.”

Lavellan smiled back and offered a bent arm. “Of course. Catch me up on what happened to the El’amelan after... After.”

She slipped her hand through his arm and held onto the crook of his elbow as they walked the halls of the fortress once more, passing familiar areas that made his heart ache.

“I entered uthenera after your death so that I could revert back to a spirit of Memory,” she said. “My nature as Memory allowed me to retain my memories while I was Elvhen without damaging my psyche. From there, I began to preserve any information about you. We couldn’t tell your story because we thought it may be disrespectful to go against the anonymity you’ve preserved for so long, but we couldn’t let you be forgotten either. This was a compromise.”

“Thank you,” he murmured and patted her hand. “And thank you for the dagger during my execution. It was a mercy.”

Asunara bowed her head. “It was not enough.”

“It was more than enough. I didn’t shatter thanks to you.”

“You still died.” Her grip on his arm tightened. “Why did you not ask us for help? Why did you go about this mission alone? We could have...” She paused, her head bowing further. “We could have helped. You could have relied on us.”

He turned his head away. “The stakes were high, and I was challenging the very gods. If you’d all been involved, then you would have suffered with me. I couldn’t let that happen.”

She didn’t respond to that.

“Vedir had a vision of your death just after it happened,” she said instead. “They were the one who let the others know.” They turned a corner and Lavellan expected chatter and laughter to echo down the hall, but there was nothing.

“What happened to Vedir?” he asked. “Abelas said you two wanted to make sure I would not be

forgotten.”

“I will preserve, while they will tell your story in a way that would still respect you. That was our arrangement. But Vedir saw that they would be more useful in the future, so they went into uthenera shortly after your death. A dormant kind rather than one meant for death. They said they will wake when it is time, but they did not know when the right time was.”

Could Vedir have been the reason why a Dalish clan had been named after Lavellan? It was likely. But how? Why? He suspected the Keeper’s book had the answer.

“Most of the El’amelan remained with Lord Dirthamen.” She dropped her gaze. “We could not even bury your remains. We would have interred you here, would have built you the grandest shrine. But...”

But traitors didn’t get burials. Traitors would be cremated and then their ashes would be destroyed with magic.

“Lord Dirthamen appealed to grant you a burial.” Her tight grip loosened, as if resigned. “But Elgar’nan was unwilling to grant any further requests despite Lady Mythal’s reasonings.”

His heart leapt to his throat and he swallowed it back down so he could ask, “How was he?”

“Cold.” Her voice went soft. “Numb.”

Lavellan’s hand absentmindedly rested over where the earring was in his inner pocket.

“He became more heavy-handed with his punishments. The public thought he was furious that his own spymaster was a traitor and was now doubling down.” She shook her head. “But there was no fury. There was nothing. He would lash a man to death without a single change in his expression.”

His chest tightened. He could image it far too easily.

“And Solas?” he asked. “Did he paint that mural in the courtyard?”

“He did.”

“He doesn’t remember me.”

“Yes, it was... peculiar.”

“Do you know what happened?”

She frowned and shook her head. “No. I had a look into his memories when we met before the time reversal. A powerful spell had damaged his memories. Specifically, memories of you. And by damage, I mean taken.”

“Taken?” he asked, brows raising.

“It wasn’t a clean extraction by any means, either. He may have resisted the spell initially.”

“Wouldn’t that leave too many inconsistencies? Surely he’d grow suspicious? He and I have worked together an awful lot of times.”

They exited out into the main garden and the sight of it invited a fresh wave of nostalgia in him. The Fade accommodated to his mood and the colours suddenly appeared more vivid yet washed at the edges with light, the scene becoming ethereal and only barely rooted to reality, as if it had been

filtered through a haze of radiance.

“Memories are fallible, easily fooled,” said Asunara, making no comment on the garden’s new state. “The mind attempts to make sense of any inconsistencies and creates scenarios that could explain or bridge the gap. It can construct false memories and convince you of their truth. It has been known to happen. Otherwise, it can be dismissed as a blurry memory.”

Like when Lavellan had asked Solas about the dogwood tree.

They climbed the floating steps onto the gazebo hovering above an artificial pond. It was cosy within as always thanks to Vedir’s eye for decoration. The sunlight that the Fade had fabricated hit the waters and scattered into fractals.

“And this spell appears to also be a deterrent,” she said and let go of his arm. “If he encounters a damaged or inconsistent memory, he is encouraged to gloss over it.”

He stared down at the fishes swimming within the pond. “Blood magic, then,” he said. “Powerful caster, too.”

A suspicion curled in his mind.

“How did Elvhenan fall?” he asked her.

She dusted off the front of her robes. “Rather than tell you, I believe I can show you.”

He faced her fully. “What do you mean?”

“I told you when we first met that objects and places can store memories, provided the emotions involved were powerful. However, I cannot reach most of the areas of interest anymore because they are in Arlathan. And Arlathan is... inaccessible. However, some key events have happened in areas still available. I’ve visited those places and collected the memories. I can show them to you.”

“Wait,” he said and reached into his coat and pulled out the earring, showing it to her. “Before we view those memories, I just want to confirm something first. This would have been with Dirthamen for a while after my death. I want to see the memories in it.”

“So long as there are powerful emotions within the memory.” She held out her hand. “May I?”

Lavellan offered it to her, ignored the twist in his chest as he parted with it.

Asunara encased it in her hand, a halo of blue light flaring around it. She closed her eyes and furrowed her brows. Lavellan stayed quiet as she concentrated.

“Yes, the earring has memories,” she murmured. “I will collect them now.”

He stayed quiet again to grant her maximum focus.

One of the fishes leapt out of the water and returned with a splash.

She opened her eyes, expression grim as she unclasped her hands. A shimmering orb of light rose from the earring and hovered in her palms. She returned the earring and he tucked it back into his pocket, tilting his head at the orb that resembled the shards of his memories in the Fade.

“We need to return to my realm to view the memories,” she said. “I can show you the other memories I’ve collected after.”

He nodded and took in the garden a final time, committing it to memory.

Then he dismantled it.

The scene dissipated like grains of sand being carried away by a wistful breeze. Lavellan's heart was hollow by the time the gazebo had melted around them.

"Let's go," he murmured and followed Asunara to her realm.

Her realm was still the same — pools of water around them, waterfalls rising to the skies.

Asunara went to the closest body of water and let it swallow the shard of light in her hands. Now that they were in her domain, her form had shifted back into the spirit radiating a contained, oceanic light.

"What did Solas say about his memories?" she asked.

"Ah," said Lavellan. "About that... I haven't told him anything."

She paused, then stared at him, the echoes of her face pulling into a small frown. "The time travelling?"

He bowed his head, voice dipping in volume as he said, "No."

Nobody said anything for a long time.

"You need to tell him," said Asunara. "We need his perspective, and I want to see how this memory spell has affected his recollection of events."

"I know, I know, it's just... Our last conversation in Elvhenan was an argument because I came to tell him something without evidence. If it is as you say and that his recollection of events are different from what actually happened—"

"You have me."

He lifted his head to look at her.

"I'm your evidence. If he doesn't believe you, I can show him memories. They may not be his, but these are objective and are unaffected by the unreliability of the mind." She drifted towards him and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I told you, you're not alone. I'm with you, to the ends of the world."

Lavellan's chest filled with the warmth of a hearth and he gave her a trembling smile.

"But let's look at the memories within the earring first," she said. "Is that alright?"

He nodded.

She held out her hand and he took it.

Asunara guided him to the edge of the nearby pool.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready.”

They jumped into the water.

Lavellan opened his eyes.

And met violet ones.

Chapter End Notes

Not gonna be another flashback arc lmao don't worry.

Also, ClearAutumnVibes has written another fic for this fic and it's a [CONSTELLATION AU](#), please go check it out, it's gorgeous.

I also recommend checking out this other [Dirthamen POV](#) and [Solas POV](#) I wrote because it sheds some light on what was going on on their end. (basically treat A tapestry of stars like a DLC haha. Not required, but it enriches things a bit more)

slams hands on the table THE ICE ROSE SYMBOLISES HIS LOVE FOR THE PEOPLE. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IT STILL PERSISTS

[1] **Nydh'uthimasha:** Ever-changing night^[1]

[2] **Da'gavelan, venavis:** Little biter, stop^[1]

The art of grieving

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be next Sunday's update but I have exam week after that so I thought it's probably better to move it up.

Unfortunately, no update for a week, see you all on the 20th!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a song of leaving

Lavellan jerked back at the sight of Dirthamen in front of him, heart racing, throat clogging—

Asunara steadied him.

“It’s alright,” she reassured. “We’re in a memory.”

He put a hand to his erratic heart and let her drag him away. The room they were in was small and unfamiliar, and Dirthamen was standing in front of a small altar, Lavellan’s raven cloak draped over his arm.

“Where are we?” he asked.

The altar was empty. There was nothing else in the room.

“Where your ashes were destroyed,” Asunara murmured, her ocean blue light dimming.

Dirthamen stood vigil in front of the empty altar, as still as a statue lost to time.

Then he left without another word.

Asunara raised her hands and the scene around them dissipated, as if swept away by an unseen hand, and they were thrust into another memory.

They were in one of the El’amelan’s courtyards.

“You foresaw this,” said Dirthamen’s voice from behind them. They turned.

Dirthamen was standing in front of Bel’vedir, who was sitting beneath a tree, their knees tucked to their chest.

“Everyone falls, Lord Dirthamen,” Vedir murmured. There were heavy shadows under their eyes. “I just did not know that it would be like this. You know my abilities do not work that way.”

Dirthamen’s gaze was hard, his shoulders even harder, fists clenched and shaking by his sides.

“Will he come back?” asked Dirthamen. “Once I... Once I take care of this situation, could I call him back?”

“Ma Venuralas, the Beyond is expansive and Change spirits are difficult to come by. Your first meeting was pure chance.”

“But there *is* a possibility?”

“Nothing is impossible. Improbable, however...” Vedir looked up at Dirthamen, weary. “But, if I may be so bold, I do not think Ras would want you to live tethered to him. He would want you to live your life.”

A broken laugh left Dirthamen. “Life? I have died with him, Bel’vedir.”

He walked away.

“Lord Dirthamen,” Vedir called out. “Your promise will be broken.”

Dirthamen stopped, his hardened expression flickering with a flash of rage. “What did you say?”

“The promise you have made to him, I have seen it broken.”

He faced Vedir again, the rage completely overtaking his earlier impassivity. Lavellan hugged himself. Dirthamen looked too much like Elgar’nan with this expression.

Vedir wasn’t fazed. They met Dirthamen’s silent fury with a calm gaze. “But I only see the future that your actions dictate. The future changes all the time. It is merely a warning to take care.”

“And what actions should I change?”

They shook their head. “If I knew, I would tell you.”

The memory began to disintegrate but Asunara froze it before it could. She turned to Lavellan.

“Vedir was lying,” said Asunara.

Lavellan blinked. “What?”

“They were lying to Lord Dirthamen. They told me that they did foresee your return and merely withheld it as they feared what Lord Dirthamen would do.”

“What did Vedir see?”

“It was far in the future, they said, so it was abstract.” She looked down in thought. “From memory, they said, ‘A leaf in the riverbend, caught by the branches of a leafless tree sailing on grounded ships. The wind in the sails, the light in the dark. A new world.’” She glanced at Lavellan. “Which is also why they didn’t tell Lord Dirthamen. He would have been gone by the time of your return. It may only sadden him further.”

“Oh,” said Lavellan, deflating.

Asunara resumed the memory’s flow again and the scene shifted from an overcast courtyard to a dim room.

Dirthamen’s room.

Not even Asunara’s glow could affect the darkness. Arlathan’s night lights streamed in from the large window and showered the two figures in the room, one in the bed, the other sitting beside them.

“You need to eat.”

“Leave me alone.”

Falon'Din and Dirthamen.

“You think he wants to see you like this?” asked Falon'Din. “Get up. Get some food in you.”

Dirthamen curled up on his side, turning his back to Falon'Din.

Falon'Din put a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. “At least draw from the Fade. Dirthamen, please.”

No response.

“What, are you going to follow him to death?” Falon'Din asked. Perhaps to get a rise out of Dirthamen, but it didn't work either.

“You didn't even say anything,” came Dirthamen's subdued response. “During the trial.”

“You're the one who's been telling me to not be stupid and then you go off challenging Father like that. Fucking— You *know* I would've stood beside you if you'd gone to war. But think about it. Who else would stand with you? Your raven didn't earn himself any favours with the rest of our family. Quite frankly, I don't know why you're so gutted when he was the one who put you in that position in the first place.”

That got a rise out of Dirthamen. He shot up off the bed and grabbed Falon'Din by the collar.

“What the fuck do you know?” he snarled in Falon'Din's face.

“Jackshit nothing! Because you're not telling me!” He shoved Dirthamen away. “I don't even know what the hell is going on with you and him. Is he your lover or not?”

“He *was*!” Dirthamen shoved him off the bed and stood. “He *was*. I had to kill him myself! And do you know what he did?” Another shove. “He stabbed himself so I wouldn't have to do it! Everything he did was to protect me and I didn't listen, and now he's *dead*. Do you know what that feels like? Do you *know*?” he roared and shoved Falon'Din harder.

Falon'Din staggered, but he didn't retaliate this time.

Their ragged breathing echoed in the silence.

Dirthamen covered his face and turned away. “Just... leave.” All the rage had gone out of his voice. Lavellan wanted to hold him so terribly.

“You don't have the liberty to grieve for too long,” murmured Falon'Din. “If the family finds out you two were lovers—”

Dirthamen scoffed. “What are they going to do? Punish me?”

“Father will think you're a traitor.”

“I don't care what he thinks.”

“Don't be an idiot. I don't know what your raven was trying to protect you from, but don't let it be for nothing. Don't die from starvation, that's insanely pathetic. Live for him.”

Dirthamen didn't respond.

Falon'Din righted his robes and left, the sound of the door slamming shut ringing around them. Dirthamen just stood, didn't move.

Lavellan held very little love for Falon'Din, but he had to agree with him this time. He certainly didn't want to see Dirthamen neglecting himself like this, but at the same time, he knew how debilitating grief could be.

Dirthamen returned to his bed and sat on the edge of it, glanced at the hidden door connected to Lavellan's room.

Waiting.

He stared for a long time, gaze empty.

Nobody came.

Warmth and pressure built behind Lavellan's eyes.

Dirthamen hung his head, gave a tired wave of his hand to light the crystals in the room. Lavellan's breath hitched at Dirthamen's state. He was the palest Lavellan had ever seen him, his face thinner, had lost some weight, shadows beneath his dull eyes, lips cracked, his hair which he'd always taken care of now unkempt and unwashed.

Oh, my love.

Lavellan wanted to take his hand and pull him close, wanted to rub colour back into his cheeks, bring light back into those eyes.

But he was the one who'd taken them away in the first place.

Dirthamen walked towards his table, looking as if every step required great effort. There was food waiting on the table. Falon'Din must have put it there.

He stared at the food for the longest time, but he uncovered it and plated himself. It was a small portion, but it was better than nothing.

The memory dissolved from there, the strong emotions having levelled.

The scene changed to a brighter area and Lavellan flinched away from the sudden light. Once his vision adjusted, he took in the new scene. It was a study. Looking out of the window revealed that this was within the Vir Dirthara.

Dirthamen was leaning over a table, looking over a map. He was still a bit thin, but he at least looked healthier.

"How long is this after the visit from Falon'Din?" he asked Asunara.

"A week maybe."

The door to the study opened. Dirthamen didn't look.

Mythal stood beside him and they regarded the map together.

"Solas is asking after you," she said. "You've been turning him away. He is worried."

Dirthamen's neutral expression gave slightly. "I'll... see him later. I do not feel up to speaking to anyone."

"There are people who care, Dirthamen. You may reach out to them."

"Like my family?" he asked hollowly. "The same family who condemned my lover? And what of you? Why didn't *you* do anything?" He straightened and stared Mythal down. "You are the shadow behind Father. You have him on *your* leash."

"He is not leashed," she said, placid as always.

"I don't care what you call it. You still largely influence him. You could have put a stop to that trial, could have prevented his death—"

"Belsal'in slaughtered the soldiers. If I convinced your father to spare him, what of those seeking to see him brought to justice for the death of their loved one? Had he come willingly, an argument could have still been made for him." Her expression shifted, aura blooming with the faint green of curiosity. "I do still wonder what he was doing in your father's archive in the first place. What use would he have for the focus? Was that under your command?"

Dirthamen said nothing and they stared at one another. Lavellan chewed on his lip.

"I don't know why he was there," Dirthamen eventually said, not a single change in his tone or expression. "You heard me ask him, and you heard his answer. But there's no use wondering now, is there? He's gone."

"It is unlike you to not chase after an answer."

"I'm *grieving*!" he snapped, then reeled himself in and turned away from her, bracing his arms against the table.

A faint ripple of sorrow broke Mythal's placidity.

"You told me once that I can turn to my family when the world is cruel," said Dirthamen. "That family will catch me when I am hurt." He stared at her. "What if it was family that hurt me? Who catches me then?"

She couldn't give an answer. The ripples of her sorrow only grew.

Dirthamen looked away. "Leave. Please."

Mythal left.

The scene dissolved back into near darkness, showing a new memory. The cool dankness around them was telling of a cave.

Lavellan wouldn't ever forget this place.

The cave that led to Elgar'nar's archives.

A silent figure walked past them, their footsteps not making a sound. Dirthamen. Lavellan's earring was on his palm like a compass, pulsing with a golden glow.

Lavellan pursed his lips. So he'd found it.

Dirthamen stopped at the edge of the chasm. For a while he did nothing, but then, he swept out his

hand and the invisible bridge glowed to life, the walls of the chasm lighting up with runes.

Lavellan's eyes widened.

Alarms.

Oh, of course. He rubbed his eyes. No wonder he hadn't sensed the alarms — they could only be sensed by someone on par with an Evanuris' strength.

Dirthamen closed his hand. The runes glowed red. Disabled.

He walked across the bridge and passed the curtain of illusion, the tower appearing before them. Once again, he disabled the alarms on the door.

"I suppose that answers the question of how I got ambushed," he said.

Had he stopped to think about it, perhaps he would have realised that that had been the case.

"Are you able to pause it?" he asked Asunara and she nodded, holding out her arms. The scene froze.

He went up to the door, glanced at Dirthamen, but he forced himself to look away and focus on the door and its runes instead.

"What is it?" Asunara asked.

"Silent alarms," he said. "It would notify the caster, likely Elgar'nan, whenever someone has crossed the rune's threshold, and it also tracks whoever comes and goes. It can only be sensed and disabled by someone who can match the caster's power. There was no hope of me ever sensing it."

He should have waited.

It was too late for regrets now.

He nodded at Asunara and she resumed the memory.

Dirthamen entered the tower, steps unfaltering as he followed the earring's glow. He stopped at the table, inspected it.

Lavellan wanted to give him a hint, but it wasn't as if that would work. There was no need though. Dirthamen was clever and he'd determined that the skull was the key. Lavellan smiled to himself, an ache plucking through his heart.

Dirthamen lifted the skull.

"Well done," Lavellan murmured beneath his breath.

He reached inside and took out the cylinder, opened it.

The clutch fell onto the table. It barely made a sound.

Dirthamen stared at it for a long moment.

They stood in the silence. Lavellan almost asked Asunara if she'd halted the memory, but Dirthamen finally moved. He retrieved the clutch and reunited it with the earring. The earring ceased pulsing. He tucked it into the folds of his robes and unrolled the scroll.

As before, it depicted the process of creating the foci. Dirthamen frowned. He ran seeking fingers over the surface, his frown deepening.

Could he undo the illusion?

Dirthamen reached for a small knife in his sleeve and cut his palm, dripped blood onto the scroll. Upon contact, the blood dissipated into red smoke.

The illusion collapsed, seeping away like bleeding ink.

Dirthamen's frown vanished, replaced by frozen disbelief.

He stepped back from the table, not uttering a single sound, his hands trembling, one still bleeding.

Lavellan moved towards him, found himself reaching to comfort or reassure, the plucking ache in his heart reverberating through every rib.

But he stopped.

And brought his hand back down.

This was in the past. This had already happened.

And Lavellan hadn't been there.

Dirthamen's expression of disbelief twisted into a heated snarl. He slammed a fist down onto the table and roared, the sound jagged with pain and rage. Again and again, he slammed his fist down. Lavellan shook from where he stood, unable to tear his eyes away as Dirthamen curled into himself and pulled at his hair and *screamed*, tears running down his snarling face.

Soon, the fury left, and his screams became gutted cries. Sounds of unimaginable sorrow.

He dropped to his knees and called for a lover who would never reply.

Lavellan tore his gaze away, vision blurring.

"Nara," he said, voice cracking.

She raised her arms again and the scene changed. They were doused back in sunlight, standing in the middle of a forest.

"I'm sorry, give me a moment," he said, wiping away the unshed tears that had gathered in his eyes.

"Are you sure you wish to continue?" she asked. "Your earring... The grief within is potent. We have seen what we needed to see. He has found the scroll. I have already collected the memories of the subsequent events leading to Elvhenan's fall."

He shook his head and blinked away the last of his tears. "I want to see."

Asunara said nothing, stared at him.

He wrapped the raven cloak tighter around himself, as if he could shrink into it.

"Why are you still trying to share his pain?" she asked. Imploring, almost.

He didn't answer, only whispered, "Please."

She stood silent for a few seconds, but she sighed and resumed the memory. They walked through the forest they'd found themselves in and Lavellan couldn't help but feel that something about it was familiar.

"Where are we?" he asked.

She didn't get the chance to respond because they reached the edge of the tree line and revealed the answer.

Dirthamen's temple. The one near the Waking Sea.

They approached it, walking over the path that had been eroded by time in the present. Dirthamen was just ahead of them, carrying a chest.

The chest that had Lavellan's belongings in it.

Dirthamen moved through the temple, not sparing a glance at the priests that bowed to him, not responding to greetings or questions. He walked, solemn and stoic. The priests left him alone then, merely watching with curiosity, gazes falling on the chest. Dirthamen eventually arrived at the Chamber of the Oracle and closed the door behind him.

It was quiet.

Dirthamen's shield hovered on the altar in the centre of the chamber, the twin statues of howling wolves behind it.

He set the chest down as he knelt, pried the tiles away from the wall, worked in silence, pulling out the old chest within the hidden compartment. There was something almost ceremonial about it.

After he cleared the wall, he looked at the chest, brushed his fingers over the name on the lid.

"I have no remains to pay my respects to," murmured Dirthamen, his voice gentle as it rang in the intimate space. "No urn to keep. This is the best I can do. My shield is within this room, and Solas' statues are present. In a way, I suppose I take comfort in the symbolic protection."

Lavellan neared and crouched beside him, reaching.

His hand passed through Dirthamen.

Fitting. He was a ghost.

"A foolish part of me hopes you will come back," said Dirthamen. "Even if Falon'Din has told me that you no longer remember your life. Perhaps, one day..." He braced his trembling arms against the chest. Teardrops fell on Lavellan's name. "Every day without you feels like death, but I will wait. I will die over and over and wait for an eternity if I must."

Lavellan clenched his jaw, his foolish heart breaking at the seams.

Dirthamen laughed, the sound deprecating and wet. "That sounds pathetic, doesn't it?" He looked skywards, smiling with tear-stained lips. "Did you know? I was thinking of asking you if you wanted to marry me."

A sob left Lavellan and he covered his mouth.

“I know you didn’t want to ascend but that was never a requirement. And I know you hated attention so it wouldn’t have been a grand celebration. Nothing like my siblings’.” He sat and leaned against the chest, still looking skywards. “But I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

Lavellan’s throat felt thick.

Dirthamen worked on sliding the chest into the wall. Each tile was put back carefully.

Here a god was, on his knees and building his own temple back up by hand.

Afterwards, Dirthamen placed his hand over the wall and pressed his forehead against it.

“I hope you are well, that you don’t feel as lost as I do,” whispered Dirthamen. “I like your eyes, too.”

Lavellan reached for him again, but the memory faded and changed, and he was left reaching for empty air.

He lowered his hand.

Hollowness gnawed at him.

“Where are we now?” Lavellan asked, voice reflecting the emptiness that had settled in his soul.

“This is no longer from your earring. I think this is a memory from the fortress because we are in such close proximity to it.”

Wait, this courtyard... This was the courtyard where Solas had painted the mural.

Lavellan turned.

Indeed, Solas was here, painting.

“I’m not getting a break, am I?” Lavellan asked, almost hysterical.

“I can stop it,” said Asunara.

He watched Solas’ deft strokes, the methodical and smooth application of paint, the focus and control. It was... quite therapeutic to watch.

“No,” said Lavellan. “Wait.”

He’d always enjoyed watching Solas paint. It had always calmed him. This time was no different.

Solas worked with the same, solemn silence he had now, careful as he worked on the central figure, meticulous as he chose his paint for the colourful mosaic surrounding it. It wasn’t finished yet, so it still wasn’t moving. What was the finished piece like, Lavellan wondered?

A songbird perched on a nearby tree and sang.

Solas paused for a moment, staring at the bird with a gentle expression, the sunlight gilding his profile. The emptiness in Lavellan’s heart abated.

Eventually, Solas abandoned the brush and worked with his hands to apply the paint. It felt more personal, this time. But the closer to the edge of the mural that Solas got, the wilder the strokes of his hand became. Lavellan assumed it was an artistic choice.

But Solas' shoulders were shaking.

Lavellan moved to his side in concern and tried to put his hand on Solas' shoulders, again forgetting that he couldn't touch them, but he never got the chance.

Solas fell to his knees and Lavellan's heart dropped with him.

There he stayed, crumpled and unmoving with his head bowed, an artist in the quiet throes of grief, his fingers smearing paint as he clenched them into fists.

"I'm sorry," Solas whispered. His body shuddered from the force of a swallowed cry. "I have no right to say I love you."

Lavellan wrapped his arms around himself and shook from the effort of holding in his cries.

Asunara embraced him and the memory melted into a rush of water and Lavellan revelled in the weightless relief for a fleeting moment.

But he was soon pushed to the surface and he crawled his way out, arms trembling, tears hot as it carved its way down his cheeks. He curled into himself, the earring and grounding stone pressing into his ribs.

He returned to Solas, the sky lightening in preparation for the dawn.

Solas was already up, sitting in their empty bed, looking out of the balcony with a blank look. He made no sound or movement as Lavellan neared and stopped at the edge of the bed.

"When did you wake up?" asked Lavellan.

"Just as you left. I have been awake since."

He'd been waiting for all that time. Lavellan placed the ice rose in his hand on the fireplace's mantle, guilt churning in his stomach. Solas glanced at the rose.

"Where did you go?" Solas asked.

Lavellan didn't know how to respond.

He offered his hand instead and Solas stared at it.

"I want to show you something," Lavellan said, his heart echoing in his ears along with the distant cries of his two lovers.

They stood in front of Morrigan's eluvian. Lavellan placed his hand on it and opened it to the El'amelan's network once more, too afraid to look back and see Solas' expression, but he never once let go of Solas' hand.

Lavellan stepped into the network with Solas in tow, didn't pause as he turned back to the eluvian they'd walked out of and opened it to the fortress.

Solas said nothing of the peculiar network. He said nothing at all. Just allowed Lavellan to drag him along.

Once they were standing in the ruins of the fortress, Lavellan took a deep breath.

He faced Solas with a small, sad smile.

"I suspect you have questions," said Lavellan, and laughed humourlessly in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

I SUSPECT YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OHHHH THROW IT BACK AT HIS FACE

Here we see two gods brought to their knees. Catch me weeping quietly in my corner

Speaking of memories, I was actually reading about how unreliable and malleable memories are for my forensic psychology subject (which I dropped lmao coz my brain just goes offline at the ridiculous amount of readings. If i were a functional person, maybe I could've spaced them out and completed them at a steady pace

I wrote this 400k+ word fic in the span of a year. Is that the mark of a person with working executive function? No, it's not)

Anyway! Yeah, memories are whack.

(Also, I FINALLY put hover translations for the entire fic, my head is swimming with html codes T^T took me 3 hours)

Alright, see you all in 2 weeks. So sorry to leave you on this cliffhanger ☺ Gonna go cry as I try to study about immune cells.

Seven for a secret

Chapter Notes

Surprise, haha! Look, I know it's not sunday but i got impatient (all my exams done yay). Speaking of sundays, I'm going back to thursday updates.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

never to be gold

Solas' expression grew solemn beneath the light of dawn and it reminded Lavellan too much of his expression while he'd been painting.

"Will you answer them?" asked Solas.

Lavellan averted his gaze. "I have to show you something first."

He led Solas through the fortress (the varterral didn't stir this time) and arrived at the courtyard with the mural.

Solas stopped at the sight of it.

"Is this your painting?" asked Lavellan.

Solas let go of his hand and made his way towards the mural. Lavellan stood back and let Solas inspect it, wringing his hand behind his back and chewing on his lip as Solas ran hesitant fingers over it, tracing lines, stepping back every now and again to regard the whole piece, then returning to study the finer details of it.

"I do not..." started Solas. He placed his hand flat on the wall and looked up at the mural. "This is mine, yes, but I do not recall ever making it." He raised his hand, as if reaching for the golden orb of light. "But why do I...?"

"Do you know who this is?"

"I feel as if I do. Rather, I should. But I do not." He bowed his head. "I do not recall, yet I feel..." He faced Lavellan, desperation and confusion shining in his gaze. "Vhenan, where are we? Who is this? *What* is this? Why do I—" Tears fell from his eyes and he clutched at his chest. "My heart aches yet my mind is blank. Tell me. *Tell me!*"

A tremor of hurt ran through Lavellan, born from Solas' hurt, the pain in his voice. He went to Solas' side and caught him just as his knees gave.

"I do not understand," whispered Solas. He gripped Lavellan's arm. "I do not understand."

Lavellan's hands were trembling too, but he did his best to steady Solas as he lowered them both to the ground. Solas wiped his tears away but they wouldn't cease. His lost look grew.

The truth gathered on Lavellan's tongue, but he couldn't get it to leave.

Solas' grip tightened, fingers digging into Lavellan's muscle, the imploring look in his eyes growing. "Mahanon, *please*."

Lavellan's heartbeat echoed throughout his body, his hands tingling.

Solas was brave to have been able to tell the truth.

But where should Lavellan even start? There was no succinct way for him to open this. '*I am Ras'virelan*' would do nothing since Solas didn't even remember him and '*I was Dirthamen's spymaster*' was even less ideal considering Solas' animosity towards Dirthamen. What then? '*I'm a spirit of Change*'?

He glanced up at the mural as if that would give him his answer.

And it did.

Lavellan drew in a shaky breath.

Two words. He need only say two words, and it would be a little easier from there.

He opened his mouth, and a truth, at long last, fell from his tongue.

"That's me."

Solas stared.

Lavellan reached for Solas' hands, searching for anything that could steady him.

"Do you remember in the Fade?" asked Lavellan. "When I felt like I was splitting apart? And then we ended up in the spirit of Memory's realm?"

Solas nodded.

"I spoke to her, to Memory, while you were gone. She said I was forgetting something, and that was why I was feeling strange in the Fade. She helped me start on the path to remembering. That time when I collapsed after we helped Cole? That was because I started remembering. And then in the Dirthavaren, I was chasing after the raven-cloaked figure because they would lead me to the glyphs. And those glyphs had fragments of my memories."

"Memories of?"

"Myself. My past life. I'm..."

He breathed in, out.

"I'm a spirit of Change," said Lavellan. "And just as you did for Mythal, I crossed for Dirthamen."

At the mention of Dirthamen, Solas' gaze darkened, but he said nothing else, didn't remove his hands from Lavellan's grip.

"I was his spymaster. They called me Ras'virelan and Isha'belsal'in. Do you recognise those names?"

His eyes sparked. "When Imshael referred to you as Isha'bel..."

"It was from Isha'belsal'in."

He wiped his tears away. “The Man of Many Faces?”

“A derivative of shapeshifting — the alteration of the body, but I took it a step further. I would always change my face so that I couldn’t be tracked and so that I could keep Dirthamen safe.” He shook his head. “You truly don’t remember me?”

Solas bowed his head in thought and frowned. His tears had stopped now.

The silence dragged.

Lavellan grinded his teeth from apprehension, the scrape of it echoing in his ears.

“Have we met in Elvhenan?” asked Solas.

“We have. Do you recall that job with the Forgotten? When you first used your focus?”

His brows raised. “I was alone.”

“Then how did you get back?”

“I—” He frowned again. “I do not remember. It was so long ago.”

“I shapeshifted into a raven and carried you on my back.” He let out an unsteady breath. “Okay, the mission where you found the corrupted Titan’s heart. Who were you with?”

“Dirthamen.”

“And? Think, Solas. Try to remember.”

“I am,” he said sharply, as if he’d meant to snap but had reeled himself back at the last second. “It was Dirthamen and I working together at Mythal’s request.”

“I was with the two of you.” He let go of Solas’ hands to press the heel of his palms against his eyes. “Lathanir’s play!” he tried again, biting back his desperation. “It was called Song of Spring. Who were you with?”

Solas hesitated with his answer this time. “I recall being alone, but from the line of your questioning, I am assuming I’d watched it with you?”

“We talked about tradition and novelty afterwards. We talked about cyclical narratives and themes of renewal and then we talked about philosophy and history!” He dropped his hands, but his vision was blurry from having applied force to his eyes. “I ferried slaves to your sanctuary, I told you my name, I showed you my true face, you and Dirthamen held me down as you removed my vallaslin, I helped you with the tricks you’d play on the nobles, you tried to memorise the colour of my eyes so you could tell it was me despite my different faces!”

Solas’ eyes had grown wider throughout his rant.

“I’m sorry, I know you don’t remember me, but I remember you. I remember *everything*. Four thousand years and then some. And do you know what our last conversation was? It was a fucking *argument*!”

Solas’ voice was weak when he asked, “Last?”

Lavellan’s shoulders slumped and he looked away. “I died.”

A sharp breath left Solas. He stared up at the mural again, a grim understanding forming behind his gaze.

“Something or someone has interfered with your memories,” said Lavellan.

“Which thus calls to question the credibility of the rest of my memories.”

“You and Dirthamen were on good terms,” Lavellan murmured, his energy leaving him in a rush. “What happened?”

Solas clenched his fists over his lap. “Why do I feel as if you are about to defend him?”

“I’m aware that Dirthamen can be cruel, but I also know he’s kind, and he cherishes those he loves.”

Solas’ expression turned bitter. “Then I suppose he never truly cared for me.”

“He did. He made me work on the Forgotten job with you even though I disliked you at the time because he wanted me to watch over you. He helped you from the shadows. Do you know the extent of political manipulation he’s had to do just to shift blame away from you? Why do you think you were able to get away with so much? Void’s sake, he gave you a *focus*. Were those the actions of a man who never truly cared?”

“Then what would you have me believe?” he asked, voice rising.

“I’m not trying to make you believe anything!” He rubbed his face. “I just— I just want to know what happened after I died. We worked so hard to make sure the rebellion would be challenging but not devastating, but then... How had it all gone wrong?”

Solas looked away, face pulling tight in fury and betrayal. “I do not *know*. Dirthamen’s behaviour suddenly shifted and I would ask to see him, to talk to him, but he would repeatedly turn me away.”

His behaviour had changed because he’d been grieving.

Dirthamen’s screams echoed in Lavellan’s head.

“And what about you?” asked Lavellan. “At that time, what were you feeling?”

He paused in thought, closed his eyes and frowned. “Worry. I felt as if it was imperative to talk to him.”

“Why?”

The question stumped him. “I... never paused to give it thought. Perhaps there was a matter about the rebellion that required his attention or—” He stopped, glanced at Lavellan. “You. Was that when you died?”

Lavellan didn’t answer, his look turning solemn.

“He’d been grieving,” said Solas, the realisation softening his voice.

“Did you never speak to him again?”

“We spoke once, before the Evanuris had killed Mythal.” He frowned. “We argued. Then we fought. He incapacitated me with a spell. While I was asleep, the Evanuris struck.”

“Fought? Physically?”

“Yes.”

Lavellan rubbed his face again. Creators, these two were going to be the death of him.

Well, they *had* been the death of him.

“How long were you out for?” Lavellan asked.

“I assume for most of that day.”

“What was the argument about?”

“Mythal’s plan.”

Something heavy settled in Lavellan’s stomach. “Using the Evanuris as seals.”

“So you know this too?”

He waved a hand. “We’ll talk about that later. Continue?”

Solas hesitated, but nodded. “He found Mythal’s plans and showed them to me, but Mythal had already told me about it just a few weeks before this meeting. When Dirthamen found out, he grew furious and did not allow me to explain. I know he’d said something to upset me which made me lose my temper, but I cannot remember what it was he’d said. It devolved from there.”

“Thousands of years later, the Dalish still know that Dirthamen was loyal to his family. I imagine he wouldn’t have been happy about the plan. Especially if it would seal him as well.”

He frowned at Lavellan. “Seal him? No, he was not originally meant to be a seal.”

Lavellan stilled. “But— The plan called for eight seals. There were nine Evanuris, so Mythal would have been left behind.”

“Mythal? No, she’d meant to become a seal as well.”

“I— What? But what about you?”

He smiled wryly. “I agreed to be a seal. Out of Dirthamen and I, Dirthamen was best suited to be the remaining Evanuris. I believed that the People would listen to him better, and I believed that he had the qualities of a good leader. I believed that he would have taken care of Elvhenan.” His smile faded. “Evidently, I was mistaken.”

Dirthamen? Mythal had meant for Dirthamen to remain, not herself?

But then, Solas would have—

“He still wouldn’t have agreed to that,” said Lavellan.

“We knew. Which was why we never planned to tell him.”

That was *worse*!

“When the Evanuris killed Mythal, the numbers no longer aligned,” Solas said. “But the imperative part about that spell was that one had to remain. One had to ensure that the empire wouldn’t

suddenly be rendered rudderless. You saw the chaos that had transpired after Divine Justinia's death. It would have been worse. And one had to remain to ensure that what we'd fought for wouldn't have been for nothing. However, after Dirthamen's betrayal, I was left with no other choice."

Lavellan ran his hand through his hair, chest tight. "But that still only made seven seals."

"Yes. It was unstable." His gaze grew dark and heavy with sorrow. "So I created the Veil."

"Oh," whispered Lavellan.

"I thought it was the best compromise. It would strengthen the seals and keep the Forgotten restricted to their realm." He averted his gaze. "But creating the Veil took far too much out of me and I accidentally fell into a deep slumber. I'd only meant to rest for a while, not for thousands of years. You know what follows."

Oh, he knew. He knew too well.

Lavellan looked down in thought. The murder and Solas' fight with Dirthamen had happened on the same day. Had Dirthamen waited before going to Solas with the scroll or had he gone right away?

"What year?" asked Lavellan. "Mythal's murder."

"Four thousand and ninety-eight."

"Creators," sighed Lavellan. The same year he'd died. There hadn't been a lot of time in between his death and the fall of Elvhenan then. He didn't know how he felt about being born at the start of the empire and then dying near the end of it.

"But you have turned this about me," said Solas and Lavellan glanced up, met his grave look. "I am curious about *you*."

Lavellan fiddled with his sleeves, looking away. "Ask, then."

"You are clearly Dalish now. Unless you have fabricated memories of your past?"

"No. I really was born Dalish. I crossed again, for my mother that time." He told the story of Mahanon's birth, the many years he'd spent guiding the Dalish. And— "I did meet Andraste, actually. Conversated with her."

Solas' brows raised. "What was she like?"

"A person. Not a statue, not a painting." He stared at his left hand. "She wept at her pyre."

A heavy silence followed.

The sun had long risen, the desolate courtyard with its lonely mural bathing in the morning light.

"What were you like?" asked Solas. "In Elvhenan."

Lavellan raised a brow. "Is that really the question you want to ask?"

"Among others."

He paused, scrunching the ends of his scarf in thought.

“I was unseen,” said Lavellan. “An unknown. I’d cultivated a reputation of obscurity, and I was the most powerful within Dirthamen’s court in terms of raw magical strength and martial aptitude. I would argue that I was among the most influential and powerful of spymasters as well. The People feared me or thought me a myth.” He smiled at Solas. “Not unlike Fen’Harel to the Dalish.”

Solas frowned. “That is not a comparison that comforts me.”

“No,” he agreed. “But it’s true, and it wasn’t unfounded. I was... I killed many. I was devoted to the empire.” He looked up at the mural. “I was devoted to Dirthamen. And then, I grew to love the People. I grew to love the elite group of spies I have made. The El’ras’amelan.”

His eyes widened in recognition. “I do know of them. *You* were their leader?”

“Who did you think?”

“Dirthamen.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.” He looked back at Solas. “But no. It was me. I founded them and trained them.”

“That is why Abelas recognised you.”

“Yes, and I was the one to name him Faronel.”

Another spark of recognition lit in Solas’ eyes. “I vaguely recall our conversation before he entered Mythal’s service. He said he wished to change his name but that is all I recall of it.” He shook his head. “Now that I am forcing myself to recall properly, there do seem to be many blanks that I had dismissed as the unreliability of memory.”

“The spell that damaged your memory is a blood magic spell, I suspect. I think I’ve used similar magic before, but to erase an entire person like this...”

Solas pinched the bridge of his nose and scrunched his eyes. “Tell me of our relationship.”

“We... didn’t get on well in the beginning.”

He lowered his hand and smiled. “Unsurprising.”

“Our first interaction was during the Ga’amanir mission. Our next proper meeting was the job with the Forgotten Ones. I visited Tarasyl’an for the first time and froze my ass off. You told me to warm myself with a spell. I declined.”

“Did I lower the temperature further?” he asked, already exasperated.

“You lowered the temperature further.”

Solas covered his eyes with one hand.

Lavellan laughed. “Don’t be so sad. We ended up being a bit more agreeable. Though, I’m not certain why you changed your mind. Still, we eventually became very good friends. You, Dirthamen, and I would always organise plans during the rebellion. We were...”

He recalled starlit laughter, running across rooftops, carrying two on his back as Lavellan soared the skies, sharing a slice of cake beneath the stars. Recalled the long nights of frustration as they attempted to formulate plans. Recalled the elation after a successful campaign, the relief. Recalled

the despondence after a failed operation, soothed by each other's presence and murmurs of reassurance.

No matter how Lavellan tried, he couldn't gather the right words to articulate the swelling in his heart, the waves of affection and appreciation, ebbing and surging.

Lavellan sighed. "It doesn't work when I say it."

"Why not?"

He gestured. "I can't... describe just how much you two meant to me."

Solas' gaze softened. "It frustrates me that I cannot remember. I imagine we can spend an entire day and still not be done with the questions."

"It *was* four thousand years. All within the span of a few seconds after the Well of Sorrows."

"Was that how you retrieved your memories?"

"I passed on my will to the Well, then drank so I would be the vessel," he said, spinning a little lie. He'd already been the vessel.

His stomach sank.

The time travel. He still hadn't—

"You mentioned the vallaslin removal."

Lavellan swallowed, his mouth drying, stomach tightening into knots. "Dirthamen asked if I wanted it removed, but I was conflicted. I came to you for help, and you helped me decide. I felt such a loss after, but I did feel liberated afterwards. It was a long journey to get me to accept that I was a person over a weapon. A lot of coaxing from you and Dirthamen. Sometimes outright shoves."

A conflicted expression crossed Solas' face every time he'd mentioned Dirthamen.

"What's wrong?" asked Lavellan.

Solas looked away, lips thinning in displeasure, said nothing for a long moment. Lavellan tilted his head, waited.

"I do miss him. Sometimes," Solas said, but the admission was bitter. As if he'd admitted to a weakness. "As I've told you before, he was one of my most trusted. And yet." He rubbed his eyes. "I wish he'd listened."

"At that point, I think it was too late."

Solas looked back at him, weary. "Because you had died." He hesitated before his next question. "How?"

"I found the scroll," said Lavellan and Solas' expression grew grim. "I found it first, I jumped to my own conclusions, got caught, and was accused of stealing the gods' knowledge. Then executed." His breaths shallowed at the flashes of memories, of the heat, the crowd's roaring in his ears. He steadied himself before continuing. "Dirthamen tried to fight for me during the trial in the Arena."

“The Arena— That is no trial.”

“I know, but he tried. He argued with Elgar’nan, until he was given an ultimatum. Either he defends me and wars with his family, or he stays his hand. He looked ready to bite.” Lavellan gave a weak laugh, vision blurring with warmth. “I told him to stand down. Then Elgar’nan made Dirthamen execute me.”

Solas stared at Lavellan, face caught between shock and devastation.

“Want to know the worst part?” Lavellan’s tears fell. “We were lovers, Dirthamen and I.” His shoulders shook and his words trembled as he pushed through. “He couldn’t even hold the dagger properly, Solas. He was shaking the entire time. I couldn’t even move. Elgar’nan’s flames had drained me so much so all I could do was guide and steady his hand.”

He curled in on himself, tasting salt on his lips.

“And even then, he couldn’t do it. So I pushed the dagger in myself because I just wanted to buy you two some more time.” He clutched at his hair, ugly sobs tearing out his throat. Solas pulled him close and held him tight. Lavellan gripped his tunic, his words coming out stilted and choked. “I just wanted more time. And I saw the memories of you two after my death. You were both in so much pain. You said you had no right to say you love me, but you did, Solas. Why didn’t you say anything? I loved you back. I loved you both back. The three of us could have—”

That was the extent of his coherency because the thought of what they could have had placed an immovable lump in his throat. All he could do was hold onto Solas and cry.

What could they have had? Peaceful conversations in the gardens, a bed for three that would never feel empty, two heartbeats beneath his hands, messy fights, and messier reconciliations. But they’d always come back to each other. Laughter in the moonlight. Tricks in the dark. Music and paints and long discussions of philosophy. A triumvirate of hearts.

But the world had given them no space for that. Instead of coming together, they’d fallen apart.

He’d given Solas three wolves. Maybe some part of him had always known that there were three of them.

Once he felt he could speak again, Lavellan said, “I just wanted us to be happy.”

Solas’ grip around him tightened further. When Lavellan looked, he was crying too, silent tears falling down his cheeks.

“We’re a bit of a mess, aren’t we?” asked Lavellan, laughing and sobbing simultaneously.

“Only a bit,” he said and buried his face in the crook of Lavellan’s neck.

They held onto each other for a long time in that forgotten garden, crumbling beneath the weight of everything and only managing to be the steadying earth beneath the other’s feet.

After they’d calmed down, Lavellan fielded more questions and they traded information, correcting Solas’ memories.

Neither of them wanted to mention the ache in their chest. An ache calling for one other person. Because one was still hurting from the betrayal, and one was still mourning.

They wandered the ruined fortress and talked until nightfall.

Then they slept and dreamt.

Asunara was solemn as she faced Solas in their dream.

“You were the spirit of Memory we’d encountered in the Fade,” noted Solas. “Mahanon has told me that you were also a member of the El’amelan.”

“Yes.”

“Do we know one another?”

“Not very well. We’ve only spoken once in Elvhenan.” She glanced at Lavellan and asked, “What have you told him?”

“That I’m Lavellan,” he said.

She stared at him, quiet. *And what else?* her silence seemed to say.

Lavellan said nothing.

“Are you certain the two of you can handle seeing the empire fall?” she asked instead, but he didn’t miss the reproach in her gaze.

“I wish to clarify events,” said Solas, voice hard. “Yes.”

“I will warn that the sites I have collected specific memories from are ancient. That means the memories are incomplete or blurry.” Her gaze fell on Solas’ jawbone necklace. She frowned and pointed at it. “How long has that been with you?”

“A very long time,” said Solas.

Yes, Solas had always had that necklace for as long as Lavellan could remember. Although, sometimes he’d change up where he was wearing it, but it had always been there.

That item was rife with memories.

“I could gather the memories within it instead,” she murmured. She held out a hand. “May I?”

Solas gave it to Asunara and they stayed quiet as she concentrated.

She nodded after a handful of seconds.

“I’ll use the memories this has collected instead.” She looked at Solas. “You will be presented with information that will contradict with what you remember. I promise, everything I show is objective and truthful. Memories stored by objects and places do not lie.”

Solas paused, then nodded.

As before, a shard of memory left the necklace. She handed the necklace back to Solas.

“Before we proceed,” said Solas, accepting it, “I wish to ask the spirit of Memory about the correlation between emotions and memories. I do not recall painting the fresco, and yet, I felt such sorrow and despair.”

“That is understandable,” said Asunara. “The mind can only hold onto a memory provided the emotions involved were strong. But memories are not merely stored in the mind.” She tapped her chest. “They are also stored in the soul. While the mind stores events, the soul stores emotions. Whatever magic interfered with your memories only affected the mind, the sequence of events. If it had damaged the memories in your soul, you wouldn’t be this coherent.”

“Comforting,” said Solas dryly. He glanced at Lavellan, his gaze softening. “I suppose that explains the intensity of what I feel for you.”

“You have a crush on me? Embarrassing,” teased Lavellan.

Solas sighed and put the jawbone necklace back on.

They returned to Asunara’s realm, where she let the memory seep into the pool. Lavellan held his hand out to Solas.

Solas took it.

They jumped in, and this time, their hands stayed clasped tight.

Chapter End Notes

Let's go find out what the hell happened to Solas' memories

Been going over earlier chapters and changed a few scenes + corrected grammar. Most notable changes are in the Val Royeaux chapter, but not too much. Dialogue also changed a bit for the Hinterlands scene while they're talking at camp.

Lavellan: *spilling his guts out and telling his story*

Solas, hearing the mii theme in his head: ??????????

I still think about what the sad elf sandwich could've had. Alexa, play Decode by Paramore. ~~how did we get heccere when i used to know you so weeeelllll?~~

Anyway, been having a shitty 2 weeks yay. Mental health plummeted once again, my poor head. Going to wrap it with blankets and pat it for a job well done. Thank you for trying despite your currently limited capabilities. And look! You also managed to do some chores and feed yourself fairly regularly! Look at you go. (gotta treat my brain like a spooked pet otherwise I'll just be an asshole to myself)

The fall of misaligned stars

Chapter Notes

putting on boxing gloves with 'angst' written on the back Yeah, just stand there for me. Just stand perfectly still.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

raining from the skies

They stood in Lavellan's old room in the El'amelan's fortress. Solas' hand was still in his, Asunara hovering beside him.

"My old bedchamber?" asked Lavellan, staring up at the hanging glass lanterns with a soft ache. "Why are we here?"

"It is a little hard to land somewhere precise since the jawbone has accumulated many memories," said Asunara. "We may be off by a few centuries. Shall we move on?"

Soft murmurs drifted in the air.

They turned towards the sound.

Lavellan's brows raised. "Wait," he said.

There he was, asleep, bare of the vallaslin while Fen'Harel and Dirthamen conversed softly beside him. They were holding each of Lavellan's hands.

"Is that...?" asked Solas.

"Me," he confirmed. "Just after the vallaslin removal."

Dirthamen offered his free hand towards Fen'Harel, and Fen'Harel took it.

"You're a good man, and you have inspired me to aspire to be one," said Dirthamen. "You stand unwavering in your beliefs, and I have always admired that about you. To stand by yourself, to fight for it... Sometimes, I envy that about you."

Beside Lavellan, Solas hung his head.

"You sell yourself short," said Fen'Harel, his doubtful expression a mirror of Solas'. "Look at how far you have come."

"It was all thanks to you." He looked at Lavellan with a small smile. "Both of you."

Lavellan felt the swirl of embers in his heart, glowing and gentle and warm.

"He loves you," murmured Fen'Harel.

"He loves you, too." Dirthamen's voice softened. "He loves us both."

Fen'Harel smiled, looked at Dirthamen, then Lavellan, the three of them linked by joined hands and joined hearts. Lavellan wished he'd been awake then.

"The three of us against the world?" Fen'Harel asked.

"Two ravens and a wolf."

Solas watched the scene with a forlorn yet defeated shimmer in his eyes.

The memory fell, but Lavellan kept his gaze on the three of them until the very end. Them against the world. That was how it had been for a while.

He recalled the sight of their backs as they turned away.

The embers in his heart withered into ashes.

Asunara brought up another memory.

Cheers roared in his ears.

He flinched away from both the noise and the sudden flood of sunlight, eyes squinted until he could get used to the brightness and the din. Once he could absorb his surroundings fully, his lungs wrung tight.

The Arena.

They were on the very edges of the stands, and below them was the platform with its blazing walls of fire, a lone, raven-cloaked figure in chains trapped within the flames.

Lavellan stepped back.

Solas steadied him.

He looked at Solas, but Solas' gaze had fallen on someone else, his face set in surprise.

Lavellan followed his line of sight.

There Fen'Harel stood near the doors, hooded, watching in stunned despair, ignored by the crowd since they were too focused on the spectacle before them. Felassan was with him, his expression grave.

"For crimes against the empire," thundered Elgar'nar's voice, "he will be put to death!"

The cheers grew deafening.

Fen'Harel stepped forward, looking ready to storm in, his despair twisting into rage.

Felassan held him back. Fen'Harel struggled.

"You'll only get him in further trouble," hissed Felassan.

Solas had stilled beside Lavellan, face pale. His gaze darted between Lavellan on the platform below and Felassan.

Felassan.

Lavellan's grip tightened around Solas' hand.

Fen'Harel stopped struggling once Dirthamen spoke up in defence of Lavellan. Some semblance of hope flickered in Fen'Harel's eyes and Lavellan's gaze dropped, throat constricting.

There was no use.

"Do you wish to leave?" asked Asunara. Her light was flickering. She'd been present for this trial too, hadn't she?

"Does Dirthamen...?" Solas asked, but his voice died.

"No," said Lavellan, resigned. "You know how this ends."

But he hadn't realised that Solas had been present during the trial. He'd hoped that Solas had at least been spared the pain of having to watch.

"Let's go," said Lavellan.

Solas couldn't tear his eyes away from Fen'Harel, whose eyes were alight with so much hope. Hope that Dirthamen would manage to save Lavellan.

When the threat of civil war brewed during the argument, his hope mixed with determination.

The two had been ready to fight.

For Lavellan.

Too late.

Lavellan cupped Solas' face and turned his head away, their gazes meeting. "Let's go," he whispered.

Solas closed his eyes in pain and nodded.

Asunara changed the memory.

The crowd's chattering vanished.

This time, the air's chilly nip was familiar, the room they found themselves in even more so. Solas drew in a sharp breath.

Tarasyl'an. The War Room.

Dirthamen was standing by the door, Fen'Harel by the window, and the two of them stared at one another across the space between. It was a jarring contrast to the intimate and earnest atmosphere of the first memory. They both looked terrible — harrowed and dark.

The scroll was in Dirthamen's hand.

"It has been three months," said Fen'Harel, his voice weary, empty, yet incensed. "*Three*, Dirthamen. I have attempted to reach out to you innumerable times."

Dirthamen didn't answer, looking no better than an apparition. As if he'd already gone.

Silence.

"Say something," Fen'Harel snapped.

Dirthamen, still, said nothing. He walked towards the table and threw the scroll onto it instead. One end unrolled to the floor, the metal knobs ringing in the hollow silence, revealing the spell for the seals.

“Evidence,” Dirthamen finally said, sounding as cold and as lifeless as the expanse of the Frostbacks.

It was Fen’Harel’s turn to say nothing, staring at the scroll.

“We didn’t listen,” said Dirthamen. “We doubted him.”

“People can still err, no matter how beloved they may be.”

That flicker of rage that Lavellan had seen in the earlier memories returned to Dirthamen’s eyes.

“*That* is your response?” asked Dirthamen.

Fen’Harel shot him a weary look. “What else would you have me say?”

The rage in Dirthamen’s eyes sparked further.

“Read it,” said Dirthamen.

Fen’Harel stared for a few more seconds, then picked up the end of the scroll and looked at the spell.

Another few beats of silence passed.

Lavellan tensed with each second. Fen’Harel and Dirthamen’s silences had always been warm, a message and presence of its own, but there was nothing to this silence. It was a void. An absence.

He resisted shivering.

Fen’Harel looked up after he finished, met Dirthamen’s scrutiny with an impassive expression.

Dirthamen’s gaze sharpened. “You already know,” he deduced.

Fen’Harel sighed. “Dirthamen—”

“Since when?”

“Since a few weeks ago.”

“And you disagree, don’t you?” he asked, but it was less of a question and more of a threat. “You couldn’t possibly agree with the plan that got Lavellan killed.”

Fen’Harel flinched minutely.

It was confirmation enough.

“You son of a bitch,” said Dirthamen, his rage returning in full force, coiling tight like an animal ready to tear into flesh. “You agree. You *agree*?”

“Let me explain—”

“What else is there to explain? Lavellan died to get this to us so we can circumvent the outcome but you want to go on ahead with it? You mad, blithering, pathetic excuse of a man!”

“Dirthamen, calm—”

“Shut it!” His eyes were wide and wild and livid. In that moment, he truly looked deranged, driven mad by his own guilt.

Lavellan searched for Solas’ hand. Solas reached back and twined their fingers together, held on for dear life. Now that Solas had context, Lavellan could see the heartbreak in his eyes. A mirror of the heartbreak in Fen’Harel’s.

It hurt to see Dirthamen in this state.

How long had Solas spent wondering what had gone so wrong? How long had he twisted himself with his questions, asking why Dirthamen had begun acting so far removed from himself? How long had he gotten no answers, accompanied only by his guilt and uncertainty?

“You... You—!” Dirthamen shook. Fen’Harel tensed from where he was standing. “I promised him I’d keep you safe. Keep *you* safe? When you would see us sacrificed in this manner? You don’t deserve— *I* don’t deserve—” He covered his face with his hands, curling into himself, his voice coming out muffled. “He wanted me to tell you he was sorry. He was *sorry*. He thinks it’s his fault. He died thinking it was his fault. But *you*! *You* would...” Dirthamen uncovered his face, snarling. “Us against the world. Do you remember that?”

Fen’Harel’s flinch was more noticeable this time. He reached out. “Dirthamen—”

“Don’t you fucking come near me.”

Lavellan felt sick.

“Just let me explain,” Solas tried again but Dirthamen clutched at his head.

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. Why didn’t you do anything? You were in the trial, you had to have been. Why didn’t you step up?”

“You think I did not try? What would that have accomplished? It would have proven your father right. I was relying on *you*!”

“*Me*? You know I couldn’t stand against my father on my own!”

“You were on the verge of declaring war! I would have joined you so why did you back down?”

“Because Lavellan told me to! Because he was still keeping us in mind instead of himself! Because he loved us both and we *wasted* it!”

Another silence befell them. Dirthamen’s breathing had turned ragged.

“Please,” Fen’Harel tried again, placating, “let us sit down and talk. Lavellan would not want us to fight like this.”

Lavellan made a soft noise, a cross between a scoff and a sobbing laugh. “I sure would not,” he said. Yet here they were.

“The gall of you to talk as if you would know what he would want,” hissed Dirthamen.

Lavellan rubbed his eyes.

“I beg of you,” said Fen’Harel. “Please, just listen. Allow me a few minutes to explain.”

“No.” He shook his head, grabbed at his hair, looking as if he was covering his ears. “No. I don’t want to hear any more of the justifications. I don’t want to hear that my losses are for the greater good. I don’t want it. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of keeping everyone else in mind. They spit on his name and call him a traitor, but he was more loyal than this entire empire combined. They just lost a good man, the best of us, yet they revile him. They can burn and rot for all I care.”

Fen’Harel gritted his teeth. “Lavellan loved the People, you cannot just never mind them! If you cannot do it for them, then do it for him in the meantime.”

“Stop *using him* as a means to get me to agree with you!”

“I am not,” he shot back, his calm crumbling. “I am reminding you.”

“Reminding me that he cannot love the People himself because he’s gone.”

“His love does not die with him.”

“What use is a song without an instrument? Nothing!”

Fen’Harel’s composure collapsed, his expression twisting in fury.

“I loved him too!” he snapped. “I loved him too and I am grieving too and every day I relive our final conversation. At least you were able to have your final moments with him. At least you received your closure. I did not! But I am not about to discard our efforts in a fit of selfishness!”

Dirthamen’s furious expression blanked.

The temperature in the room dropped. The air trembled.

“What did you say?” asked Dirthamen, voice hollow.

Fen’Harel stood his ground. “You are being selfish.”

“Selfish,” Dirthamen repeated, voice monotone, his sudden blankness unnerving.

Lavellan inched closer to Solas for comfort. This memory was steeped in disaster and tragedy.

Solas’ grip around Lavellan’s hand tightened.

“Why did I say that?” Solas whispered in admonishment to himself.

Lavellan could form no judgements on his end. How could he? The two men he loved were in pain and were lashing out at each other instead of coming together. He no longer knew who was in the wrong or right. All he knew was that they were hurting, and he couldn’t hold them to soothe them.

“Very well,” said Dirthamen. “Selfish it is.”

He cut his palm without warning and shot out a whip of blood at Fen’Harel.

Fen’Harel raised a barrier in time.

“Have you gone mad?” Fen’Harel asked. “Stop this!”

But it seemed Dirthamen was finished talking.

Dirthamen’s blood whip snapped and grew and coiled like a great snake. The red light of it bathed

the room in crimson as they fought.

Fen'Harel defended against his onslaught of attacks. But soon, he returned streaks of fire and lightning.

They upturned furniture in their scuffle, left scorches along the walls.

Eventually, the distance closed.

The fight devolved into punches and kicks. Dirthamen grabbed Fen'Harel's collar and threw him against the table. Items fell and clattered. They shoved at each other, snarling.

Lavellan's lips twisted. This was just childish now.

He turned away.

"Nara," he started, but a red glow flared in the room. Asunara gasped.

Lavellan faced the fight again and froze.

Dirthamen's hands were clamped tight around Fen'Harel's head, and Fen'Harel was gripping Dirthamen's wrist, fighting against the hold. Droplets of blood whirled in orbit around Fen'Harel's head.

"What are you doing?" Fen'Harel demanded.

"I am going to remove your memories of that damn scroll. I will not let you throw away Lavellan's efforts!"

"No, stop!"

He struggled. Dirthamen strengthened the spell, the red glow flaring brighter, blood whirring faster.

Fen'Harel gritted his teeth and roared from the strain.

The air whined. Smelt of metal.

Dirthamen's face fell. "Wait, Solas, stop—"

"Get *away*!"

"Solas—!"

Light flared and blinded them. Lavellan looked away and raised his arms to shield his eyes, squinting from the intensity.

Once the light subsided, he lowered his arm.

Fen'Harel collapsed and Dirthamen caught him with one arm. Dirthamen stared out at nothing, stunned, then turned his gaze towards his free hand.

A gleaming shard of light coated in red was hovering over his palm.

Dirthamen stared at it in horror.

Asunara halted the memory and rushed towards the shard of light in Dirthamen's hand, inspecting

it. Lavellan's heart pounded in his ears, his vision still dancing with spots of light.

She looked up at Solas and Lavellan.

The realisation sat heavy in Lavellan's heart.

"It is memories of you," said Asunara.

Solas let out a heavy breath.

"What happened?" asked Lavellan.

"It seems Lord Dirthamen strengthened the spell to accelerate the process, but Solas fought to hold onto them. The struggle accidentally changed the intended target of the spell. It does make sense now why the extraction wasn't clean. It had been an accident."

Lavellan passed a hand down his face.

Asunara drifted back towards them and resumed the memory.

Dirthamen stared at Fen'Harel again, his rage vanishing, replaced by a moment of lucidity. He cursed to himself and set Fen'Harel down gently.

One of Dirthamen's rings pulsed with a bright flare. A call. Lavellan recalled that the ring would flare whenever the Evanuris wished to hold a meeting.

Dirthamen's eyes widened. "Already? I told them to wait."

He glanced at the memory in his hand, then Fen'Harel.

His expression set and he closed his hand over the memory, its light fading. "I'm sorry. I'll return it, I promise. I just have to take care of this."

Dirthamen hastily grabbed the scroll and left.

"That meeting," said Lavellan. "Was that...?"

Solas lips thinned into a grim line and he nodded. He let go of Lavellan's hand so he could press his hands to his eyes.

"We can stop," Asunara offered. "The events hereafter can be inferred."

Solas didn't respond.

Lavellan nodded at Asunara and she brought her hands down, the memory crumbling. He held Solas close as water surrounded them.

They burst from the surface together and helped each other back onto shore, then sat in silence, absorbing what they'd just seen. Solas stared at the ground. Lavellan put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Vhenan?" asked Lavellan.

"He was hurting, and I called him selfish," whispered Solas. He buried his head in his hands.

Lavellan didn't know how to respond.

“Had I kept a more level head, had I spent a little longer attempting to calm him down instead of throwing accusations, perhaps he would not have felt the need to...” Solas trailed off.

“Stop,” Lavellan said, not unkindly. “You were hurting, too. And Dirthamen had already shown the scroll to his family before your fight.” His gaze fell. “It was too late, by then.”

How alone had Dirthamen felt? Feeling as if everybody had betrayed him?

Solas clenched his fists over his lap. “I have held onto my fury, but now presented with this— There is only so much of myself that I can give to guilt or rage or love. I no longer know what to feel.”

“I guess the next best thing you can do is sit with it,” Lavellan murmured, placed his hand over one of Solas’ clenched fists. “Then work through it. I’m here if you need me.”

Solas’ hand relaxed slightly.

Lavellan turned to Asunara. “Were you there when Elvhenan fell?”

She shook her head. “I had gone into uthenera by then.”

“The spell calls for the seals to be using their foci,” said Lavellan, turning back to Solas. “How did you manage that?”

“The Dalish stories were not too far from the truth,” said Solas, subdued as he lifted his head, eyes dull from fatigue. “I went to the Forgotten and told them I wished to seek revenge on the Evanuris for Mythal’s murder. It played into the truth. I told them to unleash the poison in the Evanuris’ palace so that they would be forced to gather in one place, and then I would seal them away. The Evanuris rushed to the palace, using their foci to halt the poison’s progress.”

“Then you cast the spell. But with the modification of the Veil.”

Solas nodded hollowly. “I’d intended for the palace to be the poison’s final resting place, the Evanuris as the gates. But the spell was unstable due to the numbers, despite the Veil. In the end, the poison had spread to a large part of Arlathan before the spell could contain it fully.”

His stomach sank.

“The Black City,” said Lavellan. “It’s Arlathan.” A sizeable fragment of the city, anyway. It made sense. The Black City was always visible in the Fade, always the same distance away. Arlathan had been the same. The city in the sky.

Solas didn’t meet his eyes.

When Corypheus saw the throne and claimed it to be empty... He must have happened upon one of the Evanuris’ thrones.

“I’m still concerned about the gate that the ancient magisters damaged,” said Lavellan. “What are the consequences of that, besides weakening the seals even further and letting the poison leak out?”

“I have wondered myself,” said Solas. “Whatever the case, it would be best to proceed as if the gate is now inert. The spell is already unstable enough, even with the Veil. With a gate now damaged, time is running.”

“How would that affect the Evanuris inside?”

“The best we can hope for is that they still remain in dreamless sleep.”

“The worst?”

Solas gave him a grave look. “They are free. Alternatively, dead.”

“Then let’s hope they’re still asleep. If it comforts you, the combination is probably not Elgar’nan being awake. He would have made a fuss by now.”

“Nor Andruil, for the same reason. The rest are capable of being subtle. In any case...” He turned over the hand Lavellan was holding so he could link their fingers together. “I may not fully remember you, but I am still glad we found one another once more.”

Lavellan smiled wryly. “I’m not very good at staying away.”

Solas cradled Lavellan’s face and pressed their foreheads together, closing his eyes. Lavellan closed his eyes as well. They said nothing, listening to each other’s breaths. If they had auras, Lavellan suspected they’d be sharing it, but this was a close substitute.

“Thank you for sharing your truth,” said Solas.

Lavellan stilled.

He could feel Asunara staring at him.

Solas drew away, his hands pulling back from Lavellan’s face.

Lavellan grasped Solas’ wrist so that he would keep his hand there.

“I have to tell you one more thing,” said Lavellan.

“Of course.”

He kept his gaze down, his legs beginning to lose feeling from sitting on them, his mind spinning. His breaths threatened to shallow, but he held himself together.

He’d done it in Redcliffe. He could do it again.

His ears rang. Solas was staring at him expectantly.

Lavellan opened his mouth.

No sound came out.

Ice washed over him. He tried again, but he couldn’t force the words out, couldn’t make himself say it. The words stayed stuck in his throat. He was shaking.

Frightened little boy.

He would come off as manipulative if he admitted to it, and he *had* been manipulative. With his friends. With Solas. He’d known what to say to hurt him, to coax him, to change his mind.

But Solas would understand, wouldn’t he?

The last time you thought that, he turned away.

But he'd listened to the truth about Ras.

But there'd been memories, *evidence*, to back it all up. And maybe Asunara had memories of the past timeline too, but that was a time of doom and sorrow and failures and he didn't ever want to relive that again. Somehow, that time had felt worse than Elvhenan. Because he'd felt truly alone and helpless, fighting a lover who'd steadily twisted from his true self. All his friends had died. His family had died. He'd been left behind.

What if he told Solas and he walked away? He couldn't bear that again.

But there was no reason to *not* tell him! Perhaps that future could be a cautionary tale, a model of the worst-case scenario. No more lies. Lavellan could breathe. That was... That could...

But there's no reason to tell him.

He paused.

...Right? Nobody else knew about the reversal except Asunara. He *didn't* have to tell Solas. That doomed past could be forgotten. There was no need to bring it here, in this future where he had his family and friends again. Why tarnish a new canvas? Why track mud over the shining floors? What would admitting to the time travel even accomplish? More sorrow? More distress?

"Lavellan," said Asunara, admonishing.

He clenched his jaw.

"If you won't," she said, "I will."

He stared at her, eyes wide, heart tearing.

Her gaze softened, and she shook her head. "Enough. No more running."

"Is that a good idea?" asked Lavellan. "I don't want to overwhelm him."

"Is this really about him? Or is this about you?"

Solas frowned and glanced at Lavellan, who resolutely refused to meet his eyes.

"If he is not comfortable..." started Solas.

"He will never be," said Asunara. "It is not a comfortable truth. I refuse to see him suffer because he'd run from it." Her voice turned gentler and she drifted closer to Lavellan. "Please. I am tired of seeing you in pain. You deserve to be happy."

"I'm already happy," he said through gritted teeth.

"Are you? There is no need to keep a sword resting on the back of your neck. You have the means to remove it. Remove it."

His eyes watered. "You're crueller than I gave you credit for."

"Hate me after if you wish. I will accept it. But I will not accept this."

Lavellan glanced at Solas, drowning from his own breaths. *What if he walks away again?*

"Must it always be night?"

Andraste's words echoed in his ears, lilting like a bell.

He was so sick of hoping.

Lavellan hung his head.

“Solas, what year do you think I was born? As Mahanon?”

Solas frowned, but he didn't ask about the bizarre question. Let Lavellan stall for a while longer.

“You are in your early thirties. I assume some time around 9:11.”

“I was born 9:17,” said Lavellan, almost a mumble. “But my age is correct.”

Solas quieted, working out the numbers in his head. “Then you should be... But you are older by six years—”

He stopped.

Solas hadn't taken long to deduce it in the Redcliffe future.

Lavellan said nothing else, kept his gaze resolutely on the ground, his grip around Solas' wrist tightening. He couldn't stop shaking.

“I wish to hear it from you,” said Solas. Lavellan couldn't decipher the tone of his voice.

The words stuck to the walls of his throat.

Lavellan forced them out, even as it dragged itself unwillingly along the way, scoring gashes across his tongue.

“I'm from the future.”

He tasted metal and for a moment, he thought that the words had truly cut his tongue, but no, he'd just been chewing on his lip and had done it too hard.

Silence.

This time, he rambled, his words flooding out, dreading the aftermath of that silence. As if the words could form a barricade between him and the fall-out.

“Everything from the Conclave onwards, I've already lived through it. I became Herald and Inquisitor, confronted Corypheus. We defeated him. But then you left and I didn't know why and I kept blaming myself and I made so many mistakes. Then I see you again three years later when the Anchor was killing me and I find out you're Fen'Harel. You took the Anchor and my arm and—”

He couldn't breathe.

“And we tried to stop you. For three years, we tried to stop you, and then it all went to a head and you— I drank from the Well then, too. You— I—” His hands tingled; he couldn't feel his legs. “You used the Well. You. Cassandra, you— I killed—” Disjointed flashes of Cassandra's dull eyes, a piercing burn in his chest.

A panicked sob tore through him and he dropped Solas' hand.

Asunara drifted closer, placed her hands firmly on his shoulders.

“It’s alright,” she soothed. “It’s alright.

Lavellan scrambled up, staggered, legs numb.

“I have to go,” he whispered.

“Wait—”

He woke himself up.

His and Solas’ hands were still clasped, the two of them sleeping beneath the stars on makeshift blankets.

Lavellan dropped his hand and wrapped the raven cloak tighter around himself.

He fled.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, look at him go! At the rate he's running away from his problems at, he'll be an olympian sprinter in no time.

Ding ding! Dirthamen did indeed take Solas' memories, although there were some very interesting guesses too.

ClearAutumnVibes has once again written another [Sad Elf Sandwich fic](#) (fluffy) because they wanted to cheer me up And Alasnirelan_Lavellan wrote [a happy ending](#) for our boys becoz i'm mean to them. And then they said "payback time!" and wrote an [alt ending](#) for that happy ending fic. Thank you both so much (despite the pain that SOMEONE has given) <3

(But again, I highly recommend reading the Solas and Dirthamen povs of the flashback arc in tapestry of stars coz it gives some background context -- I've just written a new Solas one as well).

Some of you call me a demon/evil author and I'd like to tell you a funny story. In high school, we had to make a short film about the process of inflammation during injuries. Do you know which part I played?

Pain. I had to run at the camera with a giant sign saying 'Pain' while screaming. Fun times

Echoes from undying pasts

Chapter Notes

my head is a mess, my word document is in shambles, there are half finished sentences and one-line dialogues from ambiguous scenes everywhere

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

ringing for the leavers

In hindsight, he probably shouldn't have left Solas stranded in the middle of nowhere with no way out except the eluvians, but he knew the pass for Morrigan's network, so he'd probably make it out just fine.

Lavellan returned to Skyhold, unsteady on his feet. The moment he exited the eluvian chamber, Vergala perched on his shoulder and nudged her head against his cheek in reassurance. A few people he passed shot him worried glances, but he kept moving, searching. He entered the lower Hall, crossed to the small library in brisk strides, threw open the door with shaky hands.

Ellana looked up in alarm. Lavellan slammed the door shut behind him.

"Hanon?" she asked, already walking over to him. "What's wrong?"

"I told him," he whispered, voice breaking. "I told him."

Her face fell and she pulled him into a tight hug. Lavellan shook against her, still too numb yet overwhelmed to react with anything else besides tremulous silence. His extremities felt cold. Ellana held him, said nothing else.

"He's going to leave," he said, unable to speak above a whisper. "He's going to leave again. He'll leave. They all— They all leave."

"He said that?"

"No. But now he will. He'll think I manipulated him, and I did. He'll leave."

He'd reach his hand out but all he'd see was Solas' back as he walked away.

He was going to lose Solas all over again. He'd manipulated him. He'd used his knowledge of Solas against him.

"What happened?" asked Ellana.

He told her of the fortress, the memories.

"Sweet Sylaise," she breathed. "At once? *Why?* Why would she make you do that? That was the worst time to have done it."

"I was going to run," he said, staring at the floor. "I was going to— Like a coward. I— And Dirthamen and Solas, they—" He took a shuddering breath in, but it wasn't enough. None of his

breaths felt enough. He clutched at his chest. If Asunara hadn't interfered, he wouldn't have told Solas at all, would have taken the secret to his grave.

Ellana led him to the chair and sat him down.

"And where's Solas?" she asked.

Guilt mixed with his nausea. "I left him at the fortress."

Ellana said nothing for a while again. They stayed there in the quiet, Lavellan's thoughts hitting a barrier, leaving him dazed and staring at a spot on the table. Vergala nudged her head against his cheek again.

Solas had trusted him and he'd violated that trust and now he would know. What if he began to doubt Lavellan's sentiments just as Lavellan had once doubted Solas'? Would he also question Lavellan's sincerity? Would he be furious? Would he feel betrayed once again? Would he leave again? Would they fall apart again with no hope of ever coming back this time?

He shouldn't have let Solas in so close again.

He shouldn't have loved Solas.

He shouldn't have loved Dirthamen.

He should've stayed put in the Beyond instead of crawling his way back to a world hellbent on destroying him.

This stupid, ugly, broken world.

He shouldn't have loved at all.

A soft hum filled the air and tore him away from his thoughts. He stared up at Ellana as she hummed their mother's lullaby and resecured the Dalish scarf around his neck, brushed his hair back with her fingers.

The notes curled in his chest.

A common lullaby given significance, turned unique by sunburnt hands, scraped knees, and sleepy laughter.

A song of their mother's love.

The muscles he hadn't realised had tensed relaxed.

After a handful of seconds, his lucidity slowly returned to him, mind less foggy, thoughts less frantic, more rational. When he breathed, it no longer felt as if he were gasping for air.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. His jaw was sore. He'd been clenching it too hard. "I promised Mamae I'll be strong for you."

"That was a mutual promise. We promised her we'd take care of each other." She sat on the edge of the desk. "But you always shoulder all of it. You barely ask for help when you need it. It's dangerous when you keep doing that. People struggle. It's what makes them people. If you try to hide that you're struggling, then you really will lose yourself to this... figure that others worship."

He shook his head. "They'll elevate my suffering too."

“I’m not talking about the world. I’m talking about your friends, your loved ones. You don’t have to hide from us that you’re struggling.”

Lavellan said nothing, fiddling with the ends of the Dalish scarf.

“And Hanon,” she gently said, “you’re so scared of Solas leaving you and want to avoid it so badly that you’re the one who ends up doing the leaving.”

He stilled.

“I can’t tell you what to do. I *don’t* know what to tell you. But just...” She placed a hand on his shoulder, rubbed small circles with her thumb. “Talk to him. See where it goes from there.”

“He’ll be upset,” he mumbled.

“So? He’s been upset before, but you two still managed to move through it and talk it out. How?”

He wrung his fingers, thinking back through all their arguments, their resolutions.

“Someone stepped up and opened the conversation,” he said.

“And I think it takes a lot of mettle to do that. Look, I yell at everyone, but the thought of having serious conversations with people outside of you and the Keeper make me want to throw myself into the sun.” She shrugged. “A lot of people have trouble with it. I think it’s a promising sign that you and Solas can do that. Even if it’s hard.”

Lavellan smiled at her, the soft brush of fondness sweeping away the tight grip of his nausea. “You know, I think this is why the past timeline went to shit. I didn’t have you.”

“I *am* pretty impressive.” She grinned, but it faded into something sincere. “But me being here wouldn’t have meant anything if you hadn’t let me in. That’s the difference this time, I think. You’ve put more effort into making friends. What was it you said? Your candles in the dark?”

“Right,” he said, voice soft. Maybe it was a part of his nature, too. He needed external sources of stability so that he could keep his balance. Change was volatile. It was a fact, something he couldn’t change, but there were ways to ease it. How many times had his friends come through for him? Had grounded him? Had helped him hold onto himself?

Vergala went from his shoulder to the table, tilting her head at him.

“*Sorry for worrying you,*” he thought as he rubbed the underside of her beak.

Do you want me to look for Solas?

The thought of seeing Solas again curdled his stomach. But he had to talk to him.

“*In a while.*”

Lavellan stood and hugged Ellana. “Thank you,” he whispered. “For everything. You’ve just been... It can’t be easy, supporting me. I’m always here for you, and if not me, then other people you’ve gotten close to.”

“Thanks, Hanon.” She patted his back. “How are you feeling?”

“Less frantic.” He stepped back from the hug, gave her a small smile. “What about you? What have you been up to?”

“Wondering what to do for Abelas’ first lesson.” She grimaced. “Um, I may need some help.”

His smile widened. “Of course.”

He went about his duties for the day, still feeling a mild roll of nausea, but it was ignorable for the most part. In the afternoon, he swung by for a War Council and inquired about Corypheus’ whereabouts and activities. The scouts stationed around the edges of the desert hadn’t seen any signs of him. Was Corypheus still lost in the desert?

"I know you've explained it but I'm still not entirely certain how you managed to send him to the desert," said Cullen.

"Think of it this way: I made a tunnel through the Fade using the Anchor and shot him through it." He left out the blood magic part. "Hurt quite a bit, too. I don't recommend it."

Cullen grimaced in agreement.

After a while, Morrigan joined and he told them of the way to defeat Corypheus’ dragon.

Had Lavellan been at the peak of his power, he *might* have been able to make use of the Well’s knowledge to shapeshift into a dragon himself. Might. Shapeshifting into a dragon was a difficult feat. Maintaining the form, more so.

At the Council’s conclusion, Lavellan still hadn’t heard from Vergala about Solas.

He wandered Skyhold’s battlements instead, gnawing at his lip, trying to take his mind off it. It was successful if only because the other worries in his head were at the forefront of his mind.

Corypheus’ lack of activity had him unsure. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? It was always suspicious and worrying when a rowdy and unruly child was being quiet.

But more than that...

When was Flemeth going to appear to Kieran?

Lavellan didn’t know what he would do when faced with her again. He’d never known what to do in Mythal’s presence. She’d always spoken in such a confusing manner, always reliant upon metaphors and allegories and hidden messages within seemingly innocent questions.

“You look like you need a drink.”

Lavellan smiled. “Why do you always show up when I’m alone and stressed out?” He turned and watched Varric approach.

“Because you’re alone and stressed out an awful lot, Glowy.” He was holding a bottle of ale in each hand. He passed one to Lavellan. “Also, we live in the same place. Really ups the probability.”

He accepted it. They walked. Varric shot him glances as they did.

“How’s your head?” asked Varric. “The voices, I mean.”

“Behaved.” He took a swig of the ale.

“It’s always nice to hear when voices in your head are behaved.” He let out a disbelieving chuckle. “Andraste’s ass. Voices. In your head. Sometimes, I can’t keep up with the shit that’s happening to you. It makes me wonder how *you’re* keeping up.”

“I’m not.”

Varric raised his bottle and Lavellan clinked his against it.

“Yeah,” said Varric. “I don’t blame you.”

They walked across the battlements in a short silence.

“I heard you think I’m an ancient elven prince,” said Lavellan.

“Are you?”

“No, gods forbid.”

“I was thinking of asking you if you wanted to marry me.”

His grip around the bottle tightened.

“I’m mostly just messing around,” Varric admitted. “But you do make me worry about you.”

Lavellan stared at his bottle. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t really tell people when you need help.” He frowned. “It’s a little blurry but... after we helped the kid with that Templar, something happened to you, right? I know when Cole’s been messing around with my memories when he doesn’t want to be seen. This one feels like that. I can’t remember what happened after we got back.”

That seemed like such a lifetime ago.

“What did the kid take?” asked Varric.

Lavellan looked out at the Frostbacks. “I... wasn’t feeling well. Cole didn’t want you to worry, so he made you forget.”

“Didn’t want me to worry or didn’t want me to ask?”

He glanced at Varric.

Varric raised his hands as he always would when placating, but his expression was troubled.

“Look, Inquisitor, you know how I feel about my memories being messed with. But shit, you and Cole can’t keep doing that. You can’t just take it away and make us stop worrying. We worry because we care.”

“I know,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Varric rubbed the back of his neck, sighing. “You’ve got your secrets, that’s fine, I won’t pry. I just want to know, and *remember*, when you’re not feeling great, alright?”

He nodded like an admonished child.

“Oh, come on, don’t give me that kicked puppy look,” Varric complained, light-hearted. He bumped Lavellan with his shoulder, some of his drink splashing from the movement. “You know, it’s alright to be looked after.”

It was such a simple and mundane sentiment, maybe even obvious, but it still felt like a revelation.

It was alright to be looked after. Alright to be taken care of. Alright to accept love.

Because he was a person worth being loved.

He stopped walking.

Varric stopped as well and looked back at him in question.

“Glowy? Are you alright?”

Lavellan blinked at Varric, something light and warm unfurling in his chest, the brush of bird wings made of sunlight. It offset some of his nausea.

“I...” He couldn’t help the small smile pulling at his lips. “You know, maybe things are going to be okay.”

Things were going to shit, Corypheus was doing gods-knew-what, Flemeth was coming, and Solas and he had so much to sort out, so many uncertainties to determine, but he felt as if he might make it through them.

He felt like he could breathe.

How long had it been since he’d felt like this?

Varric returned his smile.

He prepared a mental list of things he wanted to tell Solas, things he wanted to clarify.

He returned to the El’amelan’s fortress, just in case, but Solas wasn’t there. Lavellan wandered for a while, had asked Vergala to scout from the skies, but nothing. Solas had left the fortress. They returned to Skyhold and Vergala patrolled the skies again.

But night was soon approaching and Vergala had still been unable to locate Solas.

Lavellan’s heart wrung, paranoia returning to whisper, *What if he left? What if he won’t ever come back? What if he hates you and never wants to see you again?* But he shook his head and placed those thoughts aside.

For now, Lavellan had dinner in the Great Hall with some of the inner circle. Cassandra joined them shortly and his recently unearthed memories had him freezing in place.

He forced himself to eat, biting down on the fork and grinding his teeth against it as he shoved bites in, trying to be forceful so he wouldn’t shake.

“Is the food not to your liking?” asked Cullen.

Lavellan looked up from eating. Everyone was staring at him. He made eye contact with Cassandra and swiftly looked away.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I was just thinking.”

He put the fork down, resting his hands on his lap away from everyone’s sight so that they wouldn’t notice they were shaking.

“Where’s Ellana?” he asked to divert their attention.

“Bullying your ancient elven friend around,” said Dorian. “I overheard them in the library.”

Bullying was most definitely *not* on the plan they’d made during their brainstorming this morning.

“What did she do?”

“Used him as a pack mule.”

Oh Creators.

Dorian tapped his chin in thought. “She was asking him what he knew of the Dalish and seemed to be having a jolly time correcting him. I believe he tried to get her back by asking about the ancient elves, but she was too knowledgeable.”

Alright, well, *challenging misconceptions* was a part of the plan. He just didn’t expect she’d do this.

At the same time, was he really surprised?

He was about to say something in return, but Vergala called on their connection.

Found him. Under a dead tree by the side of the fortress.

The dogwood tree.

“Thank you.”

Lavellan was about to excuse himself, his heart in his throat, but he spotted Morrigan wandering into the Hall. She looked around with a frown, made her way over to their table.

“Morrigan,” Lavellan greeted.

She tipped her head. “Inquisitor. Have you seen Kieran?” She scanned the Hall, frown deepening. The heart in Lavellan’s throat dropped. “He should have finished his studies by now, but he wasn’t in the library.”

His stomach flipped. “Have you tried the garden?” he asked, a subtle nudge.

“Not yet.” She tipped her head again. “Perhaps I will. Excuse me.”

Lavellan watched her go, his hand clenching over his lap. He stood. It seemed Solas would have to wait for a while longer.

There was another god to meet.

“I’ll go check on Morrigan,” he said with a small smile that he couldn’t feel.

He made his way towards the garden, feeling as though he were marching off to battle.

Upon reaching the eluvian chamber, the mirror was already open, no Morrigan or Kieran in sight. Lavellan closed the door behind him. The swirl of light and colours was almost mocking, casting taunting fingers of shadows across the walls and floor.

He took a deep breath, let it out, steady and slow.

Lavellan entered the eluvian.

The sight to greet him wasn't the Crossroads, rather, the emerald expanse of the Fade. He stared up at the green skies and its strident sun, pursed his lips at the sight of the Black City. Arlathan.

Dirthamen was there.

Lavellan tore his gaze away.

This time, there were no needles in his blood, no discomfort. Nothing but the feeling of wholeness, as if he were a droplet that had fallen at long last back into the body of water it had originated from. The energy of the Fade fluttered around him. Nigh unnoticeable, but within reach. He held out his palm, and at his call, a string of fire curled and danced around his fingers. If only it was this easy to cast spells in the waking world.

He extinguished the flame and made his way through, passed a few spirits that stared at him with unabashed curiosity.

But the longer he spent in the Fade, the more he grew aware of the agitated coiling within his being, holding on by a few threads. A sensation akin to standing at the edge of the cliff and watching the foaming waters crash against the jagged rocks below. He chewed on his lip, held a hand up to his chest.

Entropy. It wasn't as bad as it had been after his first death, but it still lingered. Dormant.

He shook off the frigid furling of fear. He mustn't let it control him.

"Morrigan?" he called out.

Was he in any spirit's domain?

A few spirits trailed behind him. He glanced at them. Most dispersed, spooked, but one remained.

He stopped walking.

The spirit was a shifting haze of greys, coalesced smoke, but a core of indigo light beat from within it like a heart.

"Secret," greeted Lavellan.

"Change," said Secret. It appraised him. "One left."

Lavellan pressed his lips into a tight line. One secret left. "I'm aware. Am I in anyone's domain?"

"Mine."

"Ah. I apologise for trespassing. I'm just looking for someone. Woman with dark hair and golden eyes and a little boy? Have you seen them?"

Secret stared at him and said nothing, the smoke around it shivering in mischief.

Lavellan resisted sighing. Right. Secret.

“Never mind,” said Lavellan and walked away. “I’ll find them myself. I’ll try to be quick.”

“Ras’virelan,” called Secret and Lavellan stopped walking, faced it again.

“So you know of me.”

“Every spirit of Secret knows of the God of Secrets and his raven.” It drew its smoke closer to itself, looked more solid as it did. Its eyes pulsed with indigo, in time with the beat of its core of light. “I thought you should know: the shadow has stirred.”

Lavellan frowned. “I’m sorry?”

“It isn’t pleased.”

“Is that a metaphor?”

“You shouldn’t have been so quick to dismiss that there was nothing. You are turning your head for a reason. It has seen you.”

Lavellan kept staring, stumped.

“It will find you or you will find it. Either way. Where there is light, there is shadow, after all.”

“I’m guessing it’s too much to ask for a straightforward response?”

“Yes.”

Spirits and their damn symbolisms—

“I’ll keep your words in mind,” Lavellan said and walked away. Secret didn’t stop him that time. He put the ominous words aside to be dissected for later and focused on his search.

It didn’t take him that much longer to find Morrigan.

“Morrigan,” he called out again and neared her.

“I do not understand,” she said, distress shining in her eyes. “To direct the eluvian to the Fade requires immense power. If he is lost to me now after all I have sacrificed...”

“It’ll be alright, come on, let’s keep looking for him. He couldn’t have gone far.”

They continued the search but Lavellan cheated slightly, urging the Fade to show him the way. Hidden paths would suddenly appear where there had been none while Morrigan wasn’t looking, and Lavellan would point them out. She was in too much of a panic to question it.

As they walked, Lavellan ran all the possible ways this could go. Would Flemeth recognise him? She hadn’t mentioned anything last time. Was it because she hadn’t known?

“Kieran!” Morrigan called out and Lavellan was pulled out of his thoughts.

In the distance was Kieran’s figure, hand outstretched towards a kneeling Flemeth.

They raced to reach them. Lavellan’s heartbeats quickened as the distance closed.

Kieran smiled at them, cheery as could possibly be as if he were in a park rather than the physical Fade.

“Mother!” he greeted.

Morrigan trained her gaze on Flemeth, expression dark. “Mother.”

Flemeth smiled as she rose.

She looked right at Lavellan.

“Now,” said Flemeth, “isn’t this a surprise?”

Chapter End Notes

Lavellan starting to feel a tiny bit better and then Flemythal knocks at the door like
":)"

spray-bottles her



(when u look at ao3's traffic stats and realise you update at a day when traffic is at its lowest *covers face with hands and screams* but am i gonna change the day? no probably not i like thursdays it's routine now lmao)

Shout out to readers who are lurking and are quietly following along by the way. hope you're having a good day and that you're enjoying the fic!

(in other news, our area is currently in lockdown there goes my plans. in the meantime, i was gifted dragon age inquisition for the pc during christmas... which means. Mods. Which means guess who's gonna replay it while being able to romance solas this time?

Also, I've changed hanon's appearance a bit coz the first screenshots didn't really match how i envision him. might put the new screenshots up on tumblr soon)

The immortal's recompense

Chapter Notes

In which Lavellan has a chat with his almost-mother-in-law

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

for unfading phantoms

Lavellan met Flemeth's stare, jaw clenched, unyielding. Two ghosts who should have stayed dead facing one another once more.

"Let him go," bid Morrigan.

Flemeth laughed. "As if I were holding the boy hostage. She's always been ungrateful, see?"

"*Ungrateful?* I know how you planned to extend your life, wicked crone." She pointed an outraged finger at Flemeth. "You will *not* have me, and you will *not* have my son!"

She gathered her magic in her hands. Lavellan's stomach dropped.

He grabbed Morrigan's arm and pulled at the Fade, disrupted her flow of magic. The spell nulled and staggered them as the energy recoiled back into her.

Morrigan stared at her hands, then at him, wide-eyed. "What—"

"Don't," he said, a touch desperate, recalling the first time that Flemeth had used the geas. He had no wish to go through that again. Or ever. "For both our sakes, just don't."

"You'd do well to listen to him, Morrigan," said Flemeth. "The boy at least knows the cost of what he takes."

He fixed her with a bitter look. She was still smiling.

"Though the lesson was a painful one," Flemeth said.

Morrigan ripped her arm away from his grip. "How did you—? What did you do?"

"I'd worry about Kieran first."

Her suspicious look didn't abate, but she at least redirected her attention back to Flemeth and Kieran.

"What is this supposed to be?" demanded Morrigan.

"You have always disliked being in the dark," said Flemeth. "Come crying when you were a child. It seems you still dislike it, even now."

"And just like then, I will find you of no help," she spat. "Give me back my son."

Kieran shot Flemeth a silent, pleading look. Flemeth considered him for a moment before her gaze softened and she nodded. Kieran's eyes lit up in relief and he ran back into Morrigan's arms. They embraced each other for a long moment, but Kieran's expression was resigned.

"Kieran," said Morrigan, "why do you hold me as if you are saying farewell?"

"I'm sorry, Mother," said Kieran and pulled away, unable to meet her eyes. "I heard her calling to me. She said now was the time."

Morrigan stared at him, lost. "I do not understand."

Her lost look grew as Kieran returned to Flemeth's side, his shoulder slumped, eyes on the ground.

Lavellan scowled at Flemeth.

"Such a dark look for a man who is hailed as merciful," said Flemeth.

"I didn't realise you listened to rumours about me."

"Difficult not to. You always seem to leave your mark on everything around you." There was a knowing look in her eyes. "Here we are, having clawed our way through the ages, shaping history as required. Isha'belsal'in and Asha'bellanar. Legends in the flesh."

He scowled further. So she recognised him. She'd made no mention of his identity last time. Was that because she hadn't known?

"Inquisitor," said Morrigan through gritted teeth, "it seems you and my mother are acquainted."

"You could say that."

Flemeth gestured with her hand. *Go on and tell her.*

"Your mother carries a part of Mythal," he said, the words bitter on his tongue.

Morrigan's brows raised and she looked back at Flemeth.

Flemeth was still smiling. She'd never stopped smiling. At least one of them was deriving amusement out of this. All he had was a worsening nausea.

"Once, I was but a woman crying out in the lonely darkness for justice," started Flemeth. "Then, she came to me, a wisp of an ancient being."

She continued explaining her circumstances just like before, a courtesy to Morrigan. Lavellan didn't interject, the sick feeling in his stomach building, souring behind his teeth.

"Truth is not the end, but the beginning," said Flemeth after her short tale.

The beginning of the end, maybe.

"Do you even know what Mythal truly is?" asked Morrigan.

"You seek to preserve the powers that were, but to what end? It is because I taught you, girl. Because things happened that were never meant to happen." Her gaze flicked towards him. Lavellan bristled. "She was betrayed as I was betrayed— As the world was betrayed! Mythal crawled her way through the ages to me, and I will see her avenged!"

His shoulders hitched, words of rage and accusation tangling and twisting in his throat, but he swallowed them and their acrid taste down because what had happened the last time he'd spoken out against Mythal?

The conversation continued, Morrigan growing agitated by the second, until Flemeth offered her an ultimatum: Kieran in exchange for Morrigan's freedom.

Not a shred of hesitation from Morrigan when she said, "He returns with me."

"Decided so quickly?"

"Do what you will with me. Take possession of my body now if you must. But Kieran will be free of your clutches." Her voice dipped into a determined murmur. "I am many things, but I will not be the mother you were to me."

Lavellan pursed his lips. The small smile that had remained on Flemeth's lips for the entire conversation faded, shifting into a look that almost resembled remorse and sorrow. A look that reminded Lavellan of Mythal's expression while Dirthamen had been grieving.

Flemeth glanced at Kieran. He looked back up at her, hopeful. She took Kieran's hands in hers and retrieved the Old God Soul, the blue light of it dancing over their faces.

"No more dreams?" asked Kieran.

She smiled. "No more dreams."

He smiled back and returned to Morrigan. She pulled him back into her arms, planted a chaste kiss on his forehead, and held him close as if Flemeth would change her mind.

"A soul is not forced upon the unwilling, Morrigan," said Flemeth. "You were never in danger from me."

Morrigan scowled. "Yes, and what are your methods to make one willing, Mother?"

Flemeth didn't answer.

"As I thought," said Morrigan. "Come, Kieran. Nothing will come out of spending any more time with her."

"Go on, then," said Flemeth, but her gaze was on Lavellan. "But you stay. You and I have a conversation long overdue."

Morrigan shot him a scrutinising look. "What is your connection to one another?"

She was almost my mother-in-law, how about that?

"Kindred spirits," he said instead. Flemeth's smile returned. "Go on. I'll see you back at Skyhold."

"Inquisitor—"

Kieran held Morrigan's hand and she stopped, looking down at him.

"Can we go home now, Mother?" he asked. "I'm a little hungry."

Morrigan's expression softened. "Tis because you neglected to mind your time again. Very well, let's go." She shot Flemeth a final, sharp look, then transferred that look to Lavellan. "We will

have words when you return, Inquisitor.”

“You’re going to have to wait,” he said. “There’s someone else who deserves to hear it first.”

Her expression tightened in displeasure, but she said nothing else, led Kieran away instead. Lavellan watched them go. Kieran shot Lavellan a look over his shoulder and offered him a small smile. Lavellan smiled back, grateful. Cheeky boy, distracting his mother.

Once they were far enough, Lavellan returned his attention to Flemeth.

“You have been quiet,” she noted. “For a herald of change. A harbinger, one yelling at the very heavens.”

“I didn’t wish to interrupt a very happy family reunion,” he said dryly. “Besides, the last time I made noise, it didn’t end well for me.”

Flemeth let out a raspy chuckle. “And since when have you let that stop you?”

Since I got killed for it? Twice?

“You smile an awful lot now,” he said instead.

“I have learned to see the humour in things.”

“You’re not really Mythal, are you?”

“I am, but I am not.”

“Not the Mythal I wish to speak to, at any rate.” He looked away. “She may be as inseparable as a heart is, but you’re not the heart itself.”

She tilted her head. “And what would you say to her, if she were here?”

“I’m sorry.”

Flemeth’s smile fell.

“I’m sorry for what she’d gone through. I’m sorry that she was betrayed by her family, and I’m sorry that she had to be the mother to an entire empire.” His expression hardened and he looked her in the eye. “But I am not sorry for what I did. I would do it again in a heartbeat if it meant keeping Dirthamen and Solas safe. I refuse your solution.”

Nobody spoke after. They stared at one another, her thoughts a mystery as always.

“She had meant for Dirthamen to stay,” said Flemeth after a few beats of uncomfortable silence.

His face pulled, almost a sneer. “She was going to leave him *alone*.”

“He would have had you.”

Lavellan stopped. “What?”

“She could see that you were his guide, and that he would be alright. That was her reasoning.”

“The compass of my heart.”

Memories of arms wrapped around him, a weight and warmth on his back.

“My guiding star,” Dirthamen whispered, voice heavy from sleepiness. “I would be lost without you. Wandering in eternal night.”

He smiled. “Are you drunk?”

“A little,” he mumbled into the back of Lavellan’s neck.

Flemeth clasped her hands behind her back. “Parents should not have favourites, yet it is evident who Mythal favoured. Dirthamen was everything she could not be. She’d wanted to raise him to be like her, yet he’d turned out better, a soul she’d once aspired to be but could no longer see.” She looked up at the rock formation behind her.

Lavellan followed her line of sight.

No, that was no rock formation — it was a large statue of a bowed, cloaked figure, speared through the heart, a waterfall of blood gushing from the wound.

Dirthamen.

Was that supposed to depict his ‘betrayal’ at Lavellan’s hands? Quaint.

“She’d been so preoccupied with raising him to be a better leader,” said Lavellan, “that she forgot to be a mother.”

“There was no space left to be a mother. And it seems he has decided, in the end, that there was no space left to be a son.” She glanced at him. “It seems you and I have inadvertently caused each other’s death.”

“Inadvertently? The entire business with the scroll almost seemed like a trap.”

“You think I had a grander scheme in mind? I did not mean for your death to happen.” Something about Flemeth’s disposition changed. Heavier, even older, a familiar light of sorrowful serenity in her eyes. More of Mythal had come to step forward. “I know how hard you have worked to keep the empire steady. You were an anchoring thread; a vital one. You cared for the world as I did. I would have been a fool to have sought for your deliberate end.”

He rubbed his face, sighing into his palm. “Then are you feeling nice enough to enlighten me about the scroll?”

“A trade, Isha’belsal’in,” said Flemeth. “There’s something I want you to consider after I explain the unfortunate circumstances that have led to our mutual doom.”

Lavellan’s shoulders tensed involuntarily at the intent glint in her eyes. “What is it?”

“Something that may interest you.” She smiled. “Optimistically, it could save the world, stop the Dread Wolf from having to shoulder that responsibility.”

“You’ll have to forgive me for not having any faith given that your last plans to save the world were... terrible.”

“You need only consider it.”

He frowned at her, felt the weight of the grounding stone in his inner pocket.

“Alright, Asha’bellanar,” he said.

She tipped her head, her crown glinting from the Fade's omnipresent emerald glow. "Ask away."

"Why keep it at Elgar'n's archive? Why not your own?"

"For temporary safekeeping. The archive was his, but we shared the space. And besides, he had no interest in the archive, had neither reason nor inclination to visit it, and he trusted that he would be alarmed should there be any intruders." And he had been. "Elgar'n and I were the only two who knew of the archive's location. And since I am the one to have devised the foci-creating spell, it would not be out of place for the scroll to be coated with my ambient magic. It was the best place I could think of."

"Temporary safekeeping?"

"I had meant to show it to Solas when the time was right."

Right. He frowned. "Did you know I found it?"

"Not until your... 'trial'. Although, I had been wondering. How did you discover the tower?"

"I saw you flying over the desert and I followed you. I shapeshifted into a spider and clung on to the back of your robes."

Unexpectedly, Flemeth threw her head back and laughed. It was more wry than amused.

"What about the illusion then?" he asked. "The first time I saw the scroll, it had the sealing spell on it. The second time, you'd already cast an illusion to disguise it as the scroll for the foci creation. Did you come back to it?"

"No. Simply, the illusion I'd used required time to take full effect. Upon completion, nobody beneath my power would have been able to sense it." And her only equal in power was Elgar'n, but as she'd said, he'd had no interest in visiting the archive. "When you'd first discovered it, it has only been recently deposited, and so, the illusion would have been weak."

"And the second time, it was stronger, but still incomplete," he deduced. "Hence why I was able to sense it."

Flemeth nodded. "So it would seem." She looked up at Dirthamen's statue once again. "How did Dirthamen come to be in possession of it? I assume he'd known to search for an illusion because of you, but how did he discover its location?"

"I left a trail."

"Doing your duty until the very end?"

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I don't do things halfway."

"No." She looked back at him. "You do not."

It was no intended trap, after all. He'd simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or the right place, depending on who you asked.

He'd been too hasty.

But then, was the alternative any better? The Evanuris locked away along with Solas, Dirthamen and Lavellan alone with an entire empire... It was a different kind of nightmare.

“Is that all?” asked Mythal.

He kept his gaze on the floor. “That’s all. Your turn. What about considering something?”

“Are you aware of the current situation with the gates?”

Lavellan glanced at the Black City hovering in the sky. “One gate is damaged from when the humans tried to breach the Black City. Because of it, some of the poison began leaking out, morphing into the Taint. So now, we have the original poison and the Taint to worry about.”

“From what I understand, a determined soul is searching for a cure to the Calling.”

Tabris.

“Perhaps their search will lead to a solution for the Taint,” Flemeth continued. “The poison, on the other hand...”

The tone in her voice sparked some wariness in him. He shot her a narrow-eyed look. “What about it?”

“I may have a way to strengthen the broken gate.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Self-sacrifice.”

He stared, didn’t respond.

“As I said, it is an option to consider. It is inevitably up to you.”

“Why me?”

“Because I am not the one who can control a core force of the Fade.”

“So it would require manipulating the force of change within the Fade? To achieve what?”

“To strengthen and repair the gate using your soul.”

His stomach flipped. “You want me to be a seal.”

“It is not matter of what I want. This is merely the path I see, and I leave it up to you whether you wish to traverse it or not.”

“You do realise what you’re asking, right?” he asked. “You do realise why Change spirits can’t go overboard with exerting control over change? We *twist*. Entropy demons wreak havoc and descend further and further into chaos until they destroy themselves.” This was why Entropy was rare, too. They never lasted long.

He didn’t want that.

“It will not be degradation if you become a seal. Stagnation, instead.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“As I said, I’m only asking that you consider. The seals will stabilise with eight souls, and that will lock the poison away for good, leaving only the Taint to be dealt with.”

Oh? So, then, the soul was still inside the broken gate. Neither dead nor freed.

“It is that, or Solas’ solution,” she said, shot him a meaningful look. “You know how that had ended.”

His shoulders tensed. “You’re aware of the time reversal as well?”

“Did you think I would not notice something of that magnitude? Besides, the Well had been torn in half as well. It was simply a matter of inference.”

“Why have you waited this long to show yourself?”

“All things have their time and events take their due course. Why rush the inevitable?”

“And what’s the inevitable in this case?”

She chuckled. “Our meeting, of course. Our fates have been tied. Loosely, perhaps, but linked, nonetheless. Our paths were bound to cross again.”

“Did you know who I was the last time, then?”

“If I did, I do not recall. Do you think I did?”

“Damned if I know.”

“Then I suppose it will remain a mystery.”

Lavellan pursed his lips, everything within him wrought with tension.

“Think on this solution,” said Flemeth. “Whatever action you take is your own. Speaking of your own.” She gestured him closer. “Come.”

“Why...?” he asked warily.

“I will free you from the vir’abelasan’s geas.”

His eyes widened and his breath hitched. “What?”

“Consider it an apology.”

He hesitated. “No tricks?”

“None.”

“Why?”

Flemeth chuckled. “I am not the villain, Isha’belsal’in. I truly am apologetic for the circumstances that have led to your death.” She paused. “And I would not have been averse to you joining the family, had events unfolded out in that manner.”

Well, he had no idea how to respond to *that*.

“You and I are more alike than you may realise,” said Flemeth. “Caring for a world that does not care for us in return.”

“I don’t understand you,” was his response.

She held out her hand, waiting.

Lavellan stared at it, a tightness in his chest.

His body would remain his, unable to be controlled by a higher, more powerful being. But what guarantee did he have that she was being sincere?

None. He had no guarantees. All he had was a risk.

So, Lavellan risked it.

His steps felt unsteady as he made his way to her.

She rested her hands on either side of his head, a coat of blue light shimmering around him, the Well's whispers surging in his head. Something gathered in the core of his being — a sick pull. Lavellan's breaths shallowed.

Did he calculate his risk right?

The sick pull shifted, as if being pushed through a sieve.

A paralysing sensation coated him. His breath caught in his throat — he couldn't move.

"Relax," urged Flemeth. "It will be over soon."

Had he made a mistake? What were her plans for him? Was she going to—

The last of the sick pulling was pushed through the sieve and the paralysis left, his muscles spasming from the release. He staggered back, breaths rapid, eyes wide.

There was a lightness within him. Airy. As if something had been unclogged.

He fixed his wide-eyed look on Flemeth. She smiled.

"You can attack me if you wish," she said. "I have no hold on you anymore."

Lavellan went for the dagger on his waist and struck.

Nothing halted him.

He stopped, the dagger tip resting mere millimetres from her neck. They stared at one another, gold eyes on gold.

Lavellan lowered the dagger and stepped back.

"No hesitation," she laughed, before her laughter softened back into a smile that was almost—
Proud.

"You are far from young and vibrant now," she said, "but you still do the People proud."

Unexpected warmth stung the back of his eyes and he pointedly looked away, crossing his arms. "Shut up," he said, but his voice dipped into a cracked whisper.

"You were never thanked for it, were you? Now, the world sings praises of you."

"I never did it to be thanked."

She nodded. Again, that pleased and proud look was in her eyes. Lavellan didn't know what to do with it.

"You best head back," she said. "Thank you for guarding the empire, and for loving my son. Farewell, Isha'belsal'in."

She walked away and he watched her go.

Everything within him was a mess.

He looked up at Dirthamen's statue, lost.

"What do I do now?" he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Okay got a few things:

1. Alasnirelan_Lavellan has written [another fic](#)! It's their rendition of Solas' POV after he finds out about Lavellan's time-travelling shenanigans
2. [New screenshots](#) for Hanon! This one is closer to how I envision him. There's long and short hair version in there
3. I also made a [masterlist](#) for the itfoyl tumblr coz I needed something to procrastinate on and i wanted to organise it so it's easy navigation for me and other ppl visiting the blog who might be searching for smth specific idk

Mythal: you're free

Lavellan: it's on sight then bitch--

Flemythal trying to prepare her kids so much for the world that she forgot to support them.

Flemeth: a soul isn't forced upon the unwilling

Me, remembering that funky robe of possession in origins: ???

(Crying about Dirthamen saying he'd be lost in eternal night without lavellan? Couldn't be me!)

Also, I'm sulking becoz I can't do the things that happened in itfoyl in the game xD

Hello? Where is my moonlit conversation on the docks of Val Royeaux with a cutscene about the wooden blocks? Where is my Hinterlands argument? *cries*

Where is my elven god of secrets why is he locked away let him out

A grain against a shore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

who are we to weigh a world

Skyhold was winding down by the time he returned. Most had retreated to bed or the tavern. It was a new moon for the twin moons tonight, so the only source of illumination came from the torches. He wrapped the raven cloak tighter around himself.

Flemeth's words replayed in his mind.

He was so tired.

Morrigan intercepted him before he could enter the Great Hall, almost threatening in the dark.

"What did you and my mother discuss?" she asked.

"None of your business."

"Tis my business. If you are affiliated with—"

"We are the furthest from friends. I don't like her. Don't know how she feels about me, and I don't care. I'm tired. Move aside, please."

She didn't move. The way she was looking at him reminded him too much of Mythal's scrutiny, piercing yet glancing off all at once, striking too close to the heart but bouncing off the rib.

"Who are you, Inquisitor?"

He met her gaze.

"I know who I am," said Cole. "Do you?"

Did he?

"I am Mahanon Lavellan," he said, side by side, two to make a whole. Now it sounded right. But what was in a name? Who was that? Change? Entropy? Herald? Inquisitor?

Fuck that, he was too tired for those questions.

"Move, please," he said. "I want to sleep."

He sidestepped Morrigan, and this time, she let him pass.

The warmth within the Great Hall soothed his chilled cheeks, brought feeling back into his fingertips. He wasn't certain whether they'd chilled from the cold or from his conversation with Flemeth.

He had to talk to Solas.

"Vergala?" he asked, but his sense of her was dim. She must be asleep. Lavellan went to the dogwood tree, using the Anchor as a light.

Solas wasn't there.

He stared at the dead tree, the eerie green light of the Anchor dancing over its skeletal branches. If he closed his eyes, he could see it flowering again, see him and Solas talking beneath it and laughing.

Which was why he didn't close his eyes.

He left and returned to the Hall with a heavy heart, checked the rotunda. Solas wasn't there either. His next try was Alexius' lab.

The door was ajar when he arrived. He peered into the room.

Alexius' apprentices — Rosalie and Felanor — were asleep on the couch. Alexius pulled a blanket over them, gentle as he tucked the blanket's corners over their shoulders. Lavellan opened the door but didn't knock in fear of waking the two up.

"Are they alright?" Lavellan asked, kept his voice low.

"They got too overzealous with their project and tired themselves out." His voice was gruff, but his eyes were fond. Lavellan smiled. "What brings you here?"

"I was looking for Solas."

"I have not seen him today."

"Ah, I see. Thank you." Lavellan was about to leave, but Alexius' voice stopped him.

"They remind me of Felix."

He looked back at Alexius, whose gaze was on Rosalie and Felanor.

"The same curiosity, passion, drive," continued Alexius. "The desire to do and be better for themselves and others, the compassion."

"They share his traits." Lavellan's gaze softened. "Those traits have meaning to you because they belonged to someone you cherish. Every time someone has those traits, that's a little bit of Felix you see. I guess that's what they mean when they say someone lives on. So, every time you're curious, passionate, driven to be better, that's a little bit of Felix living on in you, too."

Alexius said nothing but his eyes were misty in the candlelight.

"He meant the world to me," murmured Alexius. "I would have gladly let the world burn for him. I have been called selfish for it." He glanced at Lavellan. "But the world is wide and vast, Inquisitor. An abstraction filled with hypothetical souls. Felix was real. I could not understand how he could... keep everyone else in mind."

"Everyone's real when you think about it. Everyone has dreams, wishes, people they love."

"But he's just a boy." His voice cracked slightly, and he looked away again. "He was my boy. Why did he have to shoulder strangers' lives?"

Lavellan lowered his gaze, bowing his head, unsure of what to say.

"We are not made to care for so many," said Alexius. "Nobody can save the world."

His hands clenched at his sides. “You never know. It’s happened before. Take the Hero of Ferelden for example.”

“She saved *Ferelden*. That is a country.”

“The Blight could have spread further if she hadn’t stopped it.”

“And look at us now, threatened by the very thing that caused the Blight. It is never permanent.”

“Maybe. But it’s still worth a shot.”

Alexius sighed. “So busy are you saving the world, Inquisitor. What of *your* world?”

He frowned. “This *is* my world.”

“No.” He waved a hand. “Never mind. These things are best learned for yourself. Just... make sure you don’t learn it too late.”

Lavellan’s frown deepened.

Alexius cleaned up the table without another word, so Lavellan turned to leave.

“One last thing before you go,” Alexius said. “What have you heard of from the Elder One?”

“Nothing, worryingly.”

“I would be cautious.”

“I’m trying to be.” Lavellan nodded. “Good night, Alexius.”

“Gereon.”

Lavellan blinked, momentarily stunned. “Good night, Gereon.”

“Good night.”

With that, Lavellan closed the door and made his way to his quarters, puzzling over Alexius’ words, but shook his head, returning to his original objective. Maybe Solas was already asleep. Today *had* been exhausting and heavy, after all. He’d just have to find Solas in the morning. It wasn’t a terribly great idea to try and talk to him while he was drained like this either.

When Lavellan opened the door to his room, the fireplace was already lit. The servants must have come to light it earlier.

He ascended his stairs.

And stopped short at the sight of Solas sitting on the edge of Lavellan’s desk, reading the sheaf of papers in his hands.

Lavellan approached but thought better of it. He stopped three long strides away from Solas instead.

Their shadows danced along the floor.

“A list of my agents in Skyhold,” said Solas in lieu of a greeting. “This is dated at Haven, and yet, some of the names on this list are ones that I do not even recognise.”

The list Lavellan had been compiling.

“That was in my locked drawer.” Indignance rose within him. “You went through my things?”

“I apologise. You’d departed so suddenly and left me alone with information I could not reconcile. I was left with little choice but to pursue answers for myself.”

Lavellan’s indignance left, replaced by guilt and a cold wash of fear.

Solas put the papers down on the desk, his gaze distant and blank. “During our first meeting, you’d reacted to my touch so poorly, and you’d looked as if you were perpetually ready to mount a defence. You wore the look of a hardened and haunted soldier. Nightmares plagued your sleep. I reminded you of the man who’d betrayed you.”

He looked at Lavellan, the fireplace casting deep shadows over his face.

“But I was more than a reminder, wasn’t I?” asked Solas. “He was me.”

Lavellan looked away and stared at the fire instead, tense.

“I suppose I understand why you’d felt the need to influence me, to change the outcome of your situation. For self-preservation.”

“It’s not like that,” said Lavellan.

“Is it not?” He hung his head. “All this time, you knew. I must have looked like a fool. Just... tell me truthfully. Did you mean it? When you said you loved me?”

The question struck Lavellan between his ribs and he let out a punched breath.

“Of course I did.”

Solas’ impassivity crumbled. “Do not lie to me!” he snapped.

“I’m not!” He took another step towards him. Solas took one back.

Lavellan stopped.

“No, it must be a lie.” Solas covered his face with his hand. “It must be. Why else would you— How else could you love someone who...” He couldn’t finish his sentence.

Lavellan let out a wet laugh. “I don’t *know*. You think I wanted to love you again? You think I didn’t want to *stop* loving you? I was so angry at you. So angry that I felt as if I’d been poisoned, as if I would burn from the inside. But worse; I loved you still. That burned the most.”

“You should have killed me. When we first met, you should not have stopped. You should have driven the dagger into my throat and been done with it.”

His heart ached, trembling against the tenuous and fraying strings that he’d wrapped around it.

“I should have,” said Lavellan, holding himself still. As if he would shatter if he were to let himself go.

He was so sick of being the one to hold himself together.

“I should have crossed your name off my heart. I should have stayed put in my clan, never see you

again. I should have cursed you and ignored your advices and denied your knowledge and covered my ears at your stories.” His throat clogged but he continued despite it. “I should have held onto you tighter before you’d left; I should have pushed you away now. I should have kissed you harder to get you to stay; I should have killed you right where you’d stood.”

The fire crackled, popped, breathed out a cloud of embers. Solas’ expression was as exhausted and resigned as his.

Lavellan’s shoulders slumped. “I should have,” he murmured and looked away. “I should have done so many things. I should have hated you. Gods know you deserve it.”

Solas lowered his gaze in shame.

But did he? Did this Solas deserve it? This Solas had been truthful. He was so different, yet the same, and Lavellan didn’t know anymore.

“But you, you’re...” Lavellan’s vision blurred with heat, but he blinked it away. “You came forward. I can’t pin the blame for another man on you.”

“We are not separate. This is no alternate realm. He and I are one and his transgressions are mine.”

If he wasn’t a different Solas, then did that mean he’d been capable of changing like this the first time? Did that mean Lavellan hadn’t been enough then?

“So was I just... not worth staying for then?” Lavellan asked, hated that it sounded closer to begging.

“He was a fool to have left you,” he whispered. “I was a fool.”

Lavellan gritted his teeth. It wasn’t the answer he wanted.

Because this wasn’t the man that he wanted answers from.

“But he isn’t you!” he exploded. “He’s *not*. Your experiences differ from his. You’ve grown into a different person! You’re not the man who held my heart and stomped on it then burnt it for good measure. You’re not the man who took my arm. You’re not the man I stared down in a battlefield under a falling sky. You’re not the man who violated my will and made me—” He choked on his next breath.

Made me kill Cassandra.

Lavellan covered his face, screamed his frustration and grief into his hands.

Silence.

Every breath he took shuddered against the walls of his lungs.

Lavellan sat on the couch, couldn’t hold himself up any longer. He dug his elbows into his thighs, head in his hands.

Solas wasn’t that man. He was the one who’d soothed Lavellan’s distress, who’d watched over him without being asked to, who’d danced with him around the bonfire, who’d made an effort to learn more about the Dalish. Their relationship had been far from smooth, filled with so many arguments and disagreements, but despite that, they’d worked through it because Solas had stepped forward rather than back. Solas had caught him instead of retreating and leaving him to fall on his

own.

And he'd admitted to the truth.

"Why did you come forward?" asked Lavellan, tired. "Why did you admit you were Fen'Harel?"

"You deserved the truth."

His next question was almost: What made you think that now? But that would imply that Solas hadn't thought the same in the past timeline. He'd almost told Lavellan who he was in Crestwood before he'd backtracked and spoken of the vallaslin instead.

So... courage, then?

"What gave you the courage to admit it?" asked Lavellan.

Solas was quiet for a while.

Then, he answered, "You."

Lavellan raised his head, expected to see Solas with his gaze averted, but he was already looking at Lavellan.

"Me?" He snorted self-deprecatingly. That sure hadn't been the case last time.

"You were not afraid. You were willing to accept difficult truths. You..." Solas bowed his head. "You are Mercy. Perhaps I was seeking atonement, like the many imperfect people who have come to kneel before your throne. And if you turned me away, you who has seen the good in the people who have long believed it gone, then perhaps I was beyond saving after all."

Lavellan stared at him, unsure if his heart was breaking or melting, and he was too afraid to find out which.

If Solas had admitted to being Fen'Harel in the first timeline, how would Lavellan have reacted? He was sure he would have still accepted Solas if he'd explained.

But maybe he hadn't given any indication that Solas would be accepted.

Solas let out a helpless breath of a laughter. "And you were so *stubborn*. Constantly inserting yourself onto the path that I thought I would have to walk alone. Worse, you'd dragged others along with you. And still, it gets *worse*. You pointed at the forest around the path and asked for me to come explore it with you." He smiled bitterly. "Why? You should have left me alone."

"I told you. I gave up on you once, and I'm not about to do it again."

"Why?" His shoulders hitched. "Am I someone you saw as something to be fixed?"

"Why the fuck would I try to do that? I'm not here to *fix* you and you sure as hell aren't here to fix me. You don't *fix* people. I'm not giving up on you because I care about you more than I really should. Even if you hadn't been my lover. I told you before: I'm fighting for you because you're a friend, not because I see you as another cause to champion. All I did was offer you my hand."

Even in dreams, on that lake at the edge of the world, he'd offered his hand to the wolf lurking by the shores. He'd reached out for the Dread Wolf even as he'd tried to drive Lavellan away. He'd shared a hunt with him, shared a kiss with him. Over and over, he'd offered his hand.

And eventually, Solas had taken it.

But hadn't Lavellan offered his hand in the past too?

Had he really stood no chance without this foreknowledge?

"Was I really just not enough?" he murmured to himself. Was he not enough as Mahanon?

"His actions are not your responsibility," said Solas, heated. "He wished to walk alone with his actions? Then he will walk alone, and he will die alone. And he had. He was a coward."

"He was trapped and desperate."

"Why are you defending him?"

"I'm saying he wasn't in an easy position. Things had unfolded out poorly."

"Because of *his* actions! Because *I* was the fool who gave an instrument of immeasurable power to a creature of hubris!" He paused, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "What am I doing? Why are we arguing about myself?"

Lavellan couldn't help but laugh hysterically. "I am so tired. I can't do this tonight. Please, can we talk tomorrow?"

"*Will* we talk tomorrow?"

"I have nowhere left to run." He gave Solas an exhausted look. "And you deserve better."

"After all I've done?"

"It wasn't what *you* did. And I'm not after revenge. Never made me feel better, anyway." He stood. Creators, he was drained. "I really am tired. I'd prefer to have this conversation when I have enough logic in me because I am running on pure emotion and fear at this point. You've also had a long day today. I've... dropped a lot of information on you."

Solas turned his head away. "Then I will leave you be to rest."

He tried to leave.

Lavellan grabbed his wrist before he could pass him.

"I didn't say go," said Lavellan.

"I do not wish to be a cause of distress."

"Just... stay. Tonight, stay with me. Please."

Solas bowed his head, said nothing for a while. Lavellan's despair grew as the silence dragged, his heart being held together by a flimsy sheet of hope.

Then, Solas sighed, resigned. He looked back at Lavellan, his gaze defeated.

"I will stay, then."

Lavellan brought Solas' hand to his lips and pressed a shaky kiss to his knuckles in gratitude.

Solas gently pulled him closer, undid the raven cloak and draped it over the arm of the couch,

unwrapped the Dalish scarf and folded it beside the cloak. Lavellan toed his boots off and crawled beneath the sheets. Solas slipped in beside him.

He wrapped his arms around Solas and laid his head over Solas' chest, ear over his heart. Solas held him and rested his hand on Lavellan's head. They breathed together, said nothing else.

Solas' heartbeat was a little fast.

He'd been afraid, too.

Lavellan closed his eyes. The day had taken so much out of him that he was out within a minute.

The Fade awaited him, but he was too exhausted to roam it, so he partitioned a small space for himself to dream and fixed his mind on something peaceful, let the dream build from it.

He was halfway to constructing a forest when something shifted in his periphery.

Lavellan turned his head, squinted at the trees, his shoulders tensing.

"Solas?" he called out.

No answer.

He willed a bow into his hand and stalked across the forest, nocking a spectral arrow.

"Show yourself," he commanded.

Again, no answer. Was it just paranoia?

Lavellan disassembled the dream, the trees melting away, the foliage disintegrating, until he was left in the raw Fade. But there was nothing suspect around him. He frowned.

"The shadow has stirred."

He'd been acquainted with many kinds of shadows over his lifetime. What manner of shadow was Secret referring to?

His gaze fell on the Black City hovering in the distance. It wasn't the exact silhouette of Arlathan since pieces of the land must have crumbled first after the Veil was created, but he could still discern the faint spires of the palace.

How would he even reach the Black City? He didn't even know where the gates were. The only one who would know of their location was Corypheus. Maybe Flemeth. Would Solas?

Lavellan shook his head. It was a stupid plan. He shouldn't give it any further thought.

Another shift in his periphery.

He drew and shot without hesitation.

His arrow pinned a wisp of black onto the ground. He ran towards it.

The wisp was no bigger than his hand, comprised of writhing darkness, dissipating by the second. He knelt and inspected it.

This couldn't have been what had alerted him. At least, not all of it. It was like a scrap of fabric that had been torn off a coat. A remnant.

He hovered his hand over the remaining mass and risked touching it. It wrapped around his fingers, its consistency familiar yet foreign, like the shadows he'd shrouded himself with in Elvhenan. But... this felt like an absence rather than a presence.

He drew his hand back. The shadow dissolved.

Lavellan summoned the shadows he'd used in Elvhenan, let it wrap around a hand, and assessed its similarity. Everything was the same, from appearance to consistency. But these shadows didn't emanate absence.

He closed his hand and dispelled the shadows, frowning deeper.

When he woke up, it was still dark and Solas was still asleep. They'd shifted positions in the night, Lavellan's back now to Solas' chest, Solas' arm wrapped around his waist. Lavellan tried to turn but some of his hair had been caught under Solas' head. He grimaced, carefully pulled the strands away. Solas didn't stir. Lavellan turned, didn't dislodge Solas' arm, and shuffled up to sit against the headboard.

He closed his eyes and tuned into the Well.

After the hour passed, he opened his eyes to soft light. Solas was awake, but he hadn't moved, still with one arm wrapped around Lavellan's torso, staring out the balcony at the dawn.

Lavellan rested a hand on Solas' shoulder.

"Good morning," murmured Lavellan.

"Good morning. Anything of interest from the Well?"

"Overlapping whispers. The usual."

They said nothing for a while, watched the sky lighten from the sunrise. As the sun rose higher, Lavellan's heart paced faster.

With the morning came questions and confrontations.

"What did Asunara tell you?" asked Lavellan.

Solas let out a breath, turned his head and pressed his face against Lavellan's hip.

"She told me of my plan, how she'd assisted in the beginning, how she'd turned away once she'd seen me twisting." He wrapped his arm tighter around Lavellan. "How you and I caused one another's destruction. But she left much unsaid regarding you. She said it was not her place to say. I'd asked to see memories of that past."

Lavellan tensed. “And?”

“She refused. That was likely for the best.” He paused. “The visions in the Fade... When we’d fallen into her realm the first time, I saw...”

“We shared the visions,” confirmed Lavellan. “The first memory with— With you stabbing me in the back was built off of my memory of the event, an alteration of how it had happened.”

“How did it truly end?”

“Are you sure that’s where you want to start?”

Solas hesitated. Then, he sat up, cast out his hand towards the desk. Stacks of blank paper along with a pencil flew into his hands, and he passed them to Lavellan.

Lavellan took them, frowning at him quizzically.

“I was attempting to clear my head while I was dreaming,” said Solas, “and an idea occurred to me. Whenever my soldiers had to recount a traumatic event, sometimes, asking them to write rather than deliver it orally offered less distress. This way, you can take as much time as you want.”

“You... want me to write a journal?”

“If it will help. Perhaps in another format if you wish. In whatever manner and pace you are comfortable with. You need not do it all at once either. It also gives me the opportunity to absorb and revisit what you have written in my own time.”

Lavellan stared at Solas, his eyes watering, choking from the emotions surging in his throat.

“Hey,” said Lavellan, voice cracking, “it’s too early in the morning for me to cry.”

“Cry whenever you’d like.”

“I’m real sick of it.”

His gaze saddened. “You have endured much. One cannot hold all of that within themselves for long. You have held me up without complaint when I crumbled, even after...” He looked down. “This is the least I can do. The barest of minimums. I cannot turn back time and undo my wrongdoings, but I can avoid the mistakes I had made.”

Lavellan stared. “But... your plans?”

A conflicted light crossed his eyes.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Lavellan said. “That’s worse. Please, I don’t want false hope.”

Solas couldn’t drop all of his plans at the drop of a hat just because of Lavellan. It was the weight of the world versus Lavellan’s personal comfort. Why should one person take precedence over everyone else? What was one grain of sand compared to a shore?

Flemeth’s offer echoed in his head.

Lavellan pressed his lips into a displeased line and started writing instead.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to go on a month-long break because we're actually quite close to the ending. I just want to spend a bit more time thinking about it and getting it right.

It may be longer or shorter than a month, we'll see. I'm just setting an estimate for now. I may occasionally write for Tapestry of Stars so I won't disappear entirely waha. You can always reach me and ask stuff thru the [itfoyl tumblr](#).

raven4138 HAS ALSO WRITTEN [A SAD ELF SANDWICH FIC](#) IT'S BRILLIANT. And I wrote [Part 2](#) for the Solas POV during Elvhenan times

Hello Alexius how you goin we have not dropped in on you for 60 chapters i'm sorry ahaha

Please turn your attention to when Solas says "Perhaps I was seeking atonement" vs the first paragraph of the fic which says "The Dread Wolf who was all guilt and no atonement" I am Crying.

How I imagine the convo between solas and asunara went down:

Solas: show me the memories of the past timeline

Asunara: i'm sorry, you're using the MemoryLite service and you've reached your trauma limit for the night. upgrade to Premium if you want to view those memories now

And with that, I'll see yall in a about a month. (This is going to suck for me haha. I can't even take a week break without getting impatient)

Spills of ash-stained ink

Chapter Notes

slides into your email notifs missed me?

Quick recap: solas suggested lavellan write down what happened to give them both time to process the information

Not proofread very well, I'm Tired :')

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a rose for the mourner

It was easy to write the beginning. As easy as it could get, anyway. Recounting his relationship with Solas sat heavy in his stomach, but it was a manageable weight, one he'd long learned to carry. But it all truly went downhill when he wrote of the Exalted Council.

Detailing the worsening chronic pain of the Anchor, then Bull's betrayal...

Maybe it was my fault, he wrote. Maybe it was nobody's. Maybe it was his. We killed him, and the worst part was that near the end, he wasn't even putting up a fight anymore. Why? Did he want to die? To the very end, he wouldn't even take responsibility for his own life.

He grew teary at that point, so he stopped writing, and went into the tavern as if he had a battle to fight, something to prove.

Bull was there, lounging in his seat, laughing at something Krem was saying.

Bitter words built behind Lavellan's teeth.

Why? Coward. Asshole. How could you? Bastard.

"You're talking to a ghost," said a gentle voice beside him, the brim of a wide hat encroaching in on Lavellan's periphery. "But this one's real. That's not the ghost."

Lavellan looked down, counted his breaths, and walked away.

He continued the next day. Writing about seeing Solas again, the day he took Lavellan's arm, was what finally made Lavellan break down into tears.

There was no anger; just a quiet, ruined grief. Weeping over the memory of a memory.

Cole appeared beside his table and let Lavellan hold onto him and cry.

The third and last day of writing was the hardest. Lavellan didn't go into too much detail after the Exalted Council.

This is a time I'm not proud of, he wrote. I treated everyone around me poorly, I was a nightmare to work with. You'd embodied Pride, I'd embodied Entropy.

And yet, his friends had stuck with him. Had tried to knock some sense into him.

Somehow, though unsurprisingly, he ended up writing about the inner circle.

Vivienne died first. She took her death into her own hands and didn't wait for it to come for her. She armed herself and met death head-on and pointed a sword at its throat. I was able to steel myself and keep rising because of her.

Sera matured at a rate that was surprising. She just needed a bit of guidance, someone to watch her as she marches along her path so that you can steady her when she trips. You know, she kind of reminds me of you when you were younger.

Varric became the Viscount of Kirkwall. Even though he was disgruntled about the entire thing, he was the best leader Kirkwall's seen in years. He kept trying to reach out to me. I pushed him away a lot, but he never gave up. I took it for granted. I wish I'd returned the last hug he'd given me.

Cullen retired for a bit, but the moment I needed him, he took up his sword and followed me to battle. And he dragged me away to play chess whenever he thought I needed to get out of my head. He got a dog, you know? You'd have hated it. Big, drooling Mabari. Sera called him Dafty because he was a bit of a moron and the name stuck.

Josephine focused on helping her family, and I didn't want to drag her back into this world of fighting and warring. But she still put her life and reputation on the line to help us financially and politically. She didn't need to pick up a weapon. We all knew she fought as hard as any soldier on the field.

Leliana became Divine. She was... ruthless. The Sunburst Throne was reddened, and the halls of the Grand Cathedral were silent with fear. We both lost ourselves. And yet, when I needed her to kill me, she couldn't shoot. So, maybe, she hadn't completely lost herself after all.

Dorian was Dorian. Joking around even when death was hanging over him like a shroud. We drank wine, we got wasted, we cried about our exes. He freed the slaves in his estate, paid them liveable wages. Although it couldn't be made official on the papers yet, for safety reasons.

He died protecting me on the battlefield. He told me not to follow him just yet.

I guess I never did get to follow him.

And then...

Cassandra.

Cassandra stood with me despite all the storms that came our way. She wasn't afraid to scold me when I got carried away.

"It was an honour."

She had faith in me even when I had long lost faith in myself. During the final battle, we fought side by side, back to back, and we were the ones who faced you. We fought you together. We were winning.

His hands shook. His vision blurred.

You used the Well of Sorrows. I'm guessing you hadn't meant to, but you did. You made me turn my blade on her.

A wretched feeling gripped his heart.

I killed her.

"Wherever you lead us."

He'd led her to death.

He'd led everyone to death. His clan, his friends, his lover.

He'd lost everyone and everything.

Now he was here, surrounded by his mistakes, hoping and hoping that he was doing everything right this time, hoping so much, to the point that he was choking on it.

Lavellan wept harder this time, wiping away his tears to no avail until both hands were wet, his heart twisting into suffocating knots. Cole appeared again. He reached into Lavellan's pocket and pressed the grounding stone into his hand. Lavellan closed his fingers around it and held it close to his chest.

Maybe his ghosts were real again now, maybe they were alive now, but they'd still been ghosts.

"How do I put them to rest?" he asked Cole, begging almost. "How do I lay them down into their graves if they're here and alive?"

"It's not them," Cole said kindly. "You put the ghosts to rest, not them."

"That makes no sense!" He pulled at his hair, voice dropping to a broken whisper. "That makes no sense."

“It doesn’t have to make sense now. It’s still a war whistling between wounds. But all wars end. You bury the bodies at the end.”

“Wars don’t end.”

“They do. It’s the echoes that don’t. It’ll still echo later, but the war will end, and then you can give the ghosts their graves.”

“I don’t want echoes,” he said, voice shaky and cracking.

Cole bowed his head. “I can’t take them away. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

The next day, Lavellan met Solas beneath the dogwood tree, the gentle morning light brushing over them contrasting the weight in Lavellan’s chest. He passed Solas the papers. Solas accepted them solemnly.

“It’s... heavy,” Lavellan said, drained and exhausted. But he also felt lighter.

“I imagine it would be. Thank you for... trusting me with this. For allowing me to understand the magnitude of the weight you carry.” Solas looked down at the papers. “We cannot shoulder each other’s burdens, but we can steady the other when they stumble.”

Lavellan’s gaze softened. Solas had changed. When had the transformation happened? Once, maybe Solas wouldn’t have reacted this way. He may have been angrier, more distrustful, less willing to listen, to stay. Was this Lavellan’s doing? Was it really? How could one person affect another so much?

Worse; what if he’d done what Mythal had with Solas? Shaping him to be something that Lavellan wanted him to be?

“Do you resent me?” asked Lavellan.

Solas frowned. “Why would I?”

“It’s as you said. I influenced you.” He looked down, fiddled with his hunting charm. “I knew what to say, what to do.”

Was the reason why he’d fostered a good relationship with his friends because he’d known what they would like? What they wanted to hear?

“Did you wish to shape me into a specific person?” asked Solas.

“I— I don’t know. I think I was too busy trying not to cry at the sight of you.”

“Whenever we argued, what outcome were you gearing for?”

“I... don’t know? I was just mad and— I don’t know. It—” He rubbed his face.

“Whenever you helped me, whenever you did me favours, were you expecting something in

return? Were you hoping that I would feel indebted?"

"No! I just— Wanted to help."

Solas smiled. "Where we are now, was this something you saw from the very beginning? Was this your goal?"

"I don't think I could've foreseen this. I don't think I was even thinking that far ahead. I just wanted to stop you from destroying the world again." He scrunched the ends of his scarf in his grip. "I wanted you to see the world as real. To see us as real. I wanted you to see that the Dalish aren't shadows. That we're no longer the same, but we're still fighting. I made you spend time with the Dalish, pushed you to spend time with other people... That's manipulative, right?"

"How would you define manipulation?"

"Influencing others to behave a certain manner?"

"Then, would a mentor be considered manipulative? Influencing their student to behave a certain manner? Teaching them to approach the world through a certain way?"

Lavellan frowned. "That's... different."

"How so?"

"The intent?"

"But is the action of influencing another to be a certain thing not, on its own, malicious?"

His frown deepened and he couldn't give an answer.

"Is an argument filled with points of persuasion not an act of manipulation?" asked Solas. "What of a leader inspiring their troops to continue fighting?"

But that— Lavellan scrunched his face. His head hurt.

Solas sighed. "So you see, it is not so simple. Perhaps you have been manipulative, or perhaps one could argue that you were simply guiding. That you have shown me a path, but that you did not make me walk it. I could have ignored your encouragements to spend time with the Dalish, I could have declined your offers to spend time with our friends. Yet I did not, and I have found that I do enjoy some of their company." He frowned. "Though, I will still steer clear of Vivienne."

That got a weak laugh out of Lavellan. "Alright, maybe it isn't clear-cut," he said, "but I still— I'm still sorry if I *was* manipulative. I'm sorry for lying. I didn't mean for it to be malicious. I'm not a malicious person. Or, at the very least, I don't want to be one."

"That you are this tortured about the possibility that you could have been malicious bodes well." He cupped Lavellan's cheek. "And I know that you are the kind of man who wishes to do right by others. I admit, I did entertain the worst of you, briefly, but... you have always been ruled by your heart. And your heart is true."

"It's also foolish."

"Hearts are always foolish. And I am sorry, too." His grip on the papers tightened, the pages wrinkling. "I suspect that I will also have plenty more to apologise for."

Lavellan embraced him and Solas embraced him back. He buried his face into the crook of Solas'

neck and soaked in his warmth and scent.

“They are not your crimes,” whispered Lavellan.

“Regardless, I will apologise on his behalf.”

He gripped Solas’ tunic. “I do love you. Don’t ever doubt that. Whatever you read, know that I chose to keep loving you because you met me halfway.”

“Because you mean much to me.” He held Lavellan tighter, the papers crinkling from the movement. “You mean the world to me.”

And what happens when you weigh two worlds against each other?

Lavellan didn’t ask that, only gripped Solas’ tunic harder.

After he and Solas parted ways, Lavellan managed to find Blackwall and asked him to accompany him to the Arbor Wilds and fight the dragon. He agreed, and Lavellan made his way to the tavern to ask Bull.

Bull was leaning against the far wall when Lavellan entered, talking to Skinner. She left once she spotted Lavellan making his way over and nodded at him in greeting as she passed. Lavellan nodded back and continued approaching Bull with some hesitation, his skin prickling the closer he got.

Writing the letters had unearthed unpleasant memories, but his head was blank at the moment. As if his mind had moved on while his body was rediscovering its sense of alarm.

Bull raised his hand in greeting.

Lavellan flinched, hands reaching for his daggers, but he stopped himself as soon as he reacted and managed to hide it from everyone.

Almost everyone.

Bull lowered his hand slowly, gaze turning gentle.

“You’re good, Mercy,” said Bull, just soft enough that nobody else could overhear. “I’m unarmed.”

Mercy.

The more recent memories with this Bull resurfaced — drinks shared on a watchtower as they traded stories about each other’s childhood, him quietly watching over Lavellan, all the instances he’d displayed the carved dragon proudly and showed it off, the boisterous teasing and off-key singing.

Lavellan rubbed his face, his heart racing. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Here, I’ll sit down so I’m not so big.” He pulled up a seat and sat and it did help a little. “Bad week?” he asked.

“Kind of.”

“Everything a bit too easy to remember again?”

“Probably because I revisited them.” He shook his head. “Body just moved on its own just then, though.”

“Thinks you’re still in danger.” He offered a calming smile. “Want to walk? With me or someone else or on your own. The cold air really helps clear the head.”

“I think I’ll be alright, thanks. I was going to ask if you wanted to come help me fight and tame a dragon. Apparently, you fight dragons with dragons. It should help with Corypheus.”

“You know it’s always going to be a yes for dragons.” His gaze fell on someone behind Lavellan, and his face lit up. He waved them over. “Kadan!”

Lavellan watched Dorian make his way towards them.

“Energetic as always this early in the morning, I see,” said Dorian. “I never know where you get it from.”

“From sleeping and not staying up burning the candle down from reading,” said Bull. “That’s bad for your eyes, you know?”

“You complain when I use mage light. *Too bright, it hurts my eyes!* Maker forbid anyone here use a light source that can illuminate the surroundings by more than two metres. It’s a relief that you have running water at least.”

Lavellan snorted and smiled, Dorian’s presence easing his apprehension. “First my library, now my lights?”

“It’s a very serious complaint. I hope I didn’t interrupt anything, by the way. It looked like you two were in quite a serious discussion.”

“Mercy said he wants me to fight this dragon with him,” said Bull, made no mention of Lavellan’s earlier distress. Lavellan would hug him, but he was still a little agitated. “It’s going to help get rid of Corypheus’ bastard dragon.”

“Is that so? Can I come?”

Bull’s expression brightened.

“Sure,” said Lavellan. “Although, I thought you didn’t like fighting dragons?”

“Not usually. But if it will help with Corypheus...”

Lavellan eyed him. He looked nervous. Embarrassed? He’d ask later. For now, he agreed and said his farewells, gave Bull a subtle nod of gratitude, and headed for Sera’s little nook.

The door was closed. He shuffled his feet in front of it, biting at his lip. They hadn’t spoken since that brief disagreement after the temple. Was it a good idea to ask her to come to Mythal’s shrine?

He knocked.

“Sera?” asked Lavellan.

A few seconds of silence passed. No noises from inside either. Was she not here?

Something shuffled inside, followed by a soft curse, then silence. Lavellan's shoulders fell.

"Good morning," said Lavellan, softly. "I was wondering if you'd like to come with us and fight a dragon in the Arbor Wilds. We'll set out overmorrow. If you want to come, just meet us at the eluvian by mid-morning."

Still no answer.

"I hope you have a good day," he said and walked away, tried not to let it sadden him too much.

He left the tavern, waving at Bull and Dorian on the way, and wrapped his arms around himself as he walked across the courtyard.

It was slow-moving today. Quiet. The trees in the courtyard were shedding their autumn leaves, browns and oranges and reds crunching beneath his feet. Everyone was either relaxing or recovering, some mourning, laying their loved ones to rest. He was almost envious of them. Able to put those they'd lost to rest, able to have a vessel for their grief.

Lavellan caught sight of Cassandra going through sword forms beside the training dummies.

He watched her for a while, the hurt and guilt no longer so tangible and knotted in his stomach. Something about writing the letters had sanded it down into ashes.

Somehow, that felt worse.

He looked around him, at Skyhold's proud towers, the Inquisition banners aloft from the breeze.

Here it was. The Inquisition at its prime.

A sheet of nostalgia draped over his shoulders and crushed them with its weight. How strange. Being nostalgic of something that was still here.

Leaves crunched behind him.

"Admiring the scenery?" asked Morrigan.

Lavellan held back his sigh. Well, he supposed he couldn't avoid her forever. Skyhold was large, but not that large.

"You've been avoiding me," she noted.

"Only a little," he admitted and faced her.

"Tis not doing much in the way of lessening my suspicions about you."

Lavellan rubbed his eyes. "Let's talk somewhere else."

He led her to the battlements where the howling wind would mask their conversation. He leaned against the merlons while Morrigan stood with her back rigid, arms crossed.

"What has Kieran told you?" he asked.

"That you are here, and you are there. What that means, I do not know."

He blinked. “No, I don’t know what he means either.”

“What did you and my mother speak of after we left?”

“Our mutual burden.”

Morrigan regarded him, silent, eyes gleaming in thought. “Mutual burden... Do you both wish to avenge Mythal? It would make sense. She is your god, and it appears she has been wronged. Murdered.”

“Morrigan, I’d prefer to stay a healthy mountain range away from Mythal. I am not about to avenge her.”

“How intriguing that you greet your god with such hostility.”

“It’s not hostility. Just distrust.”

“And why is that?”

“Imagine living for thousands of years and ruling over an empire in that time. What would that do to a person? Their morals? Their judgement?” He frowned out at the mountain ranges. “You grew up with her. I’m sure you know firsthand just how dubious her character is.”

Morrigan frowned at him for a long moment.

The wind howled.

A handful of seconds passed. Her scrutiny turned the silence agonising and awkward.

“You...” she started, her frown melting, replaced by disbelief, “are an ancient elf.”

He snorted. “That’s quite a leap. And you’ve seen ancient elves. They’re big.”

“If you have the means and the magic to do so, it is no challenge to alter your build and appearance.”

“I’m Dalish,” he said. “That’s not a lie.”

“An ancient elf who has travelled and lived with the Dalish for a long time then.”

“No.”

“It would be much simpler for both of us, Inquisitor, if you answer truthfully.”

They stared one another down.

Lavellan capitulated first, far too drained to refute. “Fine. I’m not an ancient elf, but I was. Mythal and I caused one another’s death, in a way. A series of events.”

Morrigan’s brows raised. “I... will require more information than that.”

Lavellan gave a swift recount — spirit, to ancient elf, to spirit, to elf again. He kept it as bare as possible, didn’t cover the time travel. The rest was too intimate, reserved only for those closest to him. He wished to keep his history with Dirthamen and Solas as close to his heart as possible, tuck it tight, keep it safe. Besides, Morrigan had no business hearing of it.

He also left out the information about the Everything. That knowledge was best kept a secret for now.

Morrigan frowned to herself after he finished and looked away.

“Tis a comfort to hear that she has always been a terrible mother,” was her first response and he burst out laughing. “But Inquisitor, you must see what this means.”

“What?”

“You are the last, extensive, living record of Elvhenan. You hold within you the Well of Sorrows, but you were also the spymaster of the God of Secrets and Knowledge himself. The information you hold is invaluable.” Her look grew solemn. “If word of this were to spread, you will become a target.”

“I’m always a target.”

“More, then. How many would wish to thoroughly destroy records of the ancient elves? How many would feel threatened by the truth you carry? How many would wish to acquire for themselves the knowledge of powerful magic from the past? You are not untouchable, Inquisitor.”

He pressed his lips into a tight line. “I know. But I have no intention of letting the world know about my circumstance.” He would share any relevant knowledge with the Dalish during the next Arlathvhen. It would be a mixed reaction, he was certain. He already knew which clan elders would yell at him, but hopefully, the more accepting would outnumber those people.

“Be that as it may, there is also another danger present. What is to become of the knowledge you hold if you perish? All of that history will be lost. It must be recorded.”

“And I suppose *you* want to do the honours?”

She scowled. “Hold me in ill regard all you like, but you will be hard-pressed to find a scholar who will readily accept the truth as it is without attempting to twist it.”

“Maybe, but as my sister has told you, this is more than just knowledge and history for us. This is who we are, for better or worse. If you’re going to receive this knowledge, receive it with respect and don’t claim it for yourself.” He crossed his arms and frowned at the ground. “I understand your desire for knowledge, Morrigan. I won’t fault you for it, and I do see that you’ll likely preserve its truth better than some racist Orlesian historian, but if you are to receive it, you have to understand the weight of it. It is not yours to master, only to learn.”

Morrigan frowned as well, but it seemed more contemplative than displeased.

“I’ll think about it,” said Lavellan. “Just chew on what I’ve said for a while. If you do learn of it, don’t lord it over the Dalish either. Don’t speak over or for us. We’ve been spoken over one too many times, even if your intentions are well-meaning.”

“After all of this, you still consider yourself Dalish?”

“I do.” He tightened the scarf around his neck and pulled his hood up to protect his ears from the chill. “Good talk. If you’ll excuse me, I have to prepare for the dragon.”

With that, he walked away, already weary even though it was barely noon.

The Undercroft was quieter too, not as busy as it had been during the preparations for the Arbor Wilds. Harritt gave him a nod and returned to his work.

Lavellan approached Dagna, who was currently fluttering over the elven artifacts they'd recovered from Mythal's temple with the Sentinels' permission. He tapped her shoulder. She jumped, then laughed.

"Inquisitor! Wow, you walk very quietly." She smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"Sorry, habit. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Just doing a little screaming over these artifacts. I could use a break. What's up?"

He unstrapped one of his daggers from his belt and stared down at it. "I was wondering if I can mark the dagger in some way. To name it."

"I think so. May I?" She held out her hand and he passed it to her. She unsheathed it and inspected the dark, iridescent blade. "I can work with Harritt to work the metal so we can engrave something into it. This alloy is real finicky. Veil quartz is so difficult to work with sometimes. Strange that they call it a quartz when it's a metal. Probably because it looks like a quartz in its raw form." She shook her head. "Sorry, got sidetracked. What do you want to name it?"

"It's in Elvish." He reached into his pocket and took out the piece of paper with an Elvish character written on it.

Litha'ra.

"I can break down how to write it," said Lavellan. "I know the character looks a little complicated."

"Oh good," she laughed in relief. "I was screaming a little in despair inside, I won't lie. What does it mean?"

He smiled. "Rose. The flower."

"Aw, that's so sweet. What about the other dagger?"

"No, it's okay. Just one is fine."

"Really? I mean, it won't be too much trouble to sneak in your other dagger."

He shook his head. "It's alright, really. This is just... a promise. And a reminder."

Her eyes glimmered in curiosity, but she didn't pry. "Alright, Inquisitor. It should be ready for you by the end of today. Leave both daggers here so I can see which one will be more receptive to being handled again."

"Thanks, Dagna. Now then, here, I'll show you how to write the character."

Lavellan tried not to think about Solas reading what he'd written, did what he could to take his mind off it. He swung by the rotunda to check in on Ellana's lesson with Abelas.

"I do not understand why you insist on having me carry this many books when we do not use half of them during our lessons," came Abelas' voice from upstairs. Lavellan craned his neck to see them over the railings. Abelas was carrying a stack of books reaching up to his head.

Ellana put another on top of it. Abelas' arm dipped slightly.

"The point is," she said, placed another book, "exercise. You've been asleep for so long. I'm doing you a favour. We don't want your muscles atrophying now, do we?"

There was a chilly edge to her voice. Abelas' already sour look turned even sourer when she dropped another book on the stack. Lavellan backed away and left them to it. He retreated to the small library downstairs to knock some of his paperwork out of the way.

He wasn't surprised when Ellana burst through the door an hour or so later and slammed it shut behind her.

"I'm going to *suffocate* him," she declared. "Stuff him into a sack and throw him over the battlements. The fucking bullshit he said!"

He put the quill down. "What happened?"

"Just—" She rubbed her face. "We yelled at each other. Well, *I* yelled. He just stood there all holier-than-thou as halla shit fell out of his mouth. Shadows wearing vallaslin, running around in the forest, my *ass*. Has he looked in the mirror? The gall of him."

Lavellan pursed his lips. "Well, I'm glad you stood up for yourself."

She frowned. "I thought you'd have been a little more 'Ah, Ellana, understand where he's coming from' about this."

"Did you come here hoping I'd tell you that?"

"Maybe? I don't know. I feel bad for yelling, but I'm pissed as hell. I thought maybe you could talk me down."

He stared at her for a while, then leaned back in his seat. "Why would I talk you down? You have a right to this anger. I can say that while also saying to keep in mind why he's said what he said. This was the whole reason of the lessons." He twisted the hunting charm around his wrist. "I know he's being careful about what he says around me, but I also know what he's like from last time. I knew you wouldn't just let him talk about the Dalish like that either, which is why I assigned you to him."

"This might not work, Hanon."

"I know," he sighed. "But it *might*. I guess it just boils down to this: destroy the distance. It's not your job to convince him. Just show him that there's more to this world, to us. It's up to him whatever conclusion he comes to."

"What happens if he doesn't come around?"

Lavellan paused, then shook his head. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. But anyway, how are you?" He knew how draining those arguments could be.

Ellana deflated. “It... hurt.”

“Yeah,” he said gently and stood, opening his arms. “Come here.”

She accepted his hug and tucked her head under his chin, holding herself as small as possible so he could wrap his arms around her fully. Just like she used to when they were kids.

“Do you want me to talk to Abelas?” he asked.

“No. Let me handle him. You just stand there ready to give me hugs whenever I want them. Any time. I don’t care if you’re in the middle of fighting Corypheus or having coitus with Solas. If I want the hug, I get the hug.”

“Please don’t say coitus ever again.”

“Coitus.”

“No hugs then.”

“Then I’ll just keep saying coitus. Check and mate.”

He collected his daggers at the end of the day, as promised.

“Which one got the engraving?” he asked.

“I hope I didn’t overstep but... both?” She unsheathed his daggers. One dagger had the character for Litha’ra’s name on the base of the blade.

The other had the engraving of a small, simplified rose.

“Oh,” he murmured.

“If you don’t like it, it’s reversible!”

“No, it’s— It’s lovely.” He smiled, holding the daggers close. “It’s more than lovely. Thank you.”

Lavellan sheathed the daggers, warmth curling in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Ma'am, I seem to have water in my eyes.

Hello! Missed yall :) Unfortunately, I still can't go back to normal updates so I'll be updating every other week! Semester's started for uni again and I am a fool who's chosen a merciless degree so shit's hard :) I'm also doing a creative writing subject this sem! Exciting! But that does mean I have to split my attention between writing for that and itfoyl (I will still be working on it, not to worry!).

I also got hit with the mother of all writer's block so I wasn't able to get as much written as I would've liked grr. Was slowly trying to chug through it though coz I didn't want to lose too much momentum but i DID take breaks when needed!

(Psst, I wrote a few more tapestry of stars pieces during the month break so def worth a look if you'd like ;) includes [first-timeline solas pov](#) (this one's ouch), [angst-free dirthavellan](#), and [another dirth pov](#))

On account of our tragedy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

we keep our hearts beating

Lavellan deposited his daggers back in his quarters, pausing as he stared at the ice rose on the fireplace mantle. He picked it up and twirled it between his fingers.

Grey smoke appeared in his periphery.

“Soft light in the darkness, can hold it close to my chest,” said Cole, eyes glazing. “It’s not cold. Mamae was scared of him, but his smile and eyes were kind. He’s a monster in the dark, but he doesn’t eat bad children. He eats the bad dreams.”

Lavellan glanced at Cole. “I failed her.”

“Sharp smoke stinging my lungs. He’ll come, dark wings, fly me away, carry me again. It hurts, but I’m not afraid.”

Lavellan hung his head, his grip around the rose tightening.

“You couldn’t save her, but you helped her. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I swore I’d come if she needed me.”

“And you did.”

“Too late.”

“You still came.” Cole tilted his head, as if craning to hear something. “You tried to melt the rose, but it refused. You died, and it still refused. The Scryer left it for you, but they couldn’t see you properly, bright, brilliant, blinding. Your paths won’t cross again, but this way, they can say hello and goodbye and we love you.”

Lavellan’s eyes watered and his chest twisted in misery.

“Left beside the dead mirror to home,” Cole continued. “Memory stands solemn in front of it, waiting and alone with only the memories of the dead and gone to stand with her. Chasing the truth for so long. Now she doubts. She pushed you into a corner. It’s fine if you hate her, but maybe it’s not fine. She’s alone again and it’s her fault this time.”

Lavellan sighed and rubbed his eyes. “That’s not— Maybe it could’ve gone down better but I don’t hate her for it, and I’m hardly going to leave her alone now.”

“You should probably tell her that.”

“I will. Just need to take care of a few things first.” He put the rose back on the mantle. “Thanks, Cole.”

“I’m glad you told him. The tangles are tight, tearing, but you’re trying.”

“I don’t know where to go from here.”

Cole tilted his head. “Forward.”

Lavellan returned to the Great Hall to have dinner with some of the inner circle. Ellana swung by momentarily to grab some food, carrying two plates.

“For Abelas,” she explained at his questioning look. “Ancient elves are terrible at remembering to eat.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“Not yet. I’m about to. I’m also about to demonstrate the Dalish’s sparkling hospitality and diplomatic skills. After all, food makes the mouth busy, and a busy mouth means they shut the fuck up.”

Lavellan burst out laughing. A few of his companions either choked on their food or laughed with him.

“Go blind him with your stellar hospitality then,” he said and mentally bid Abelas good luck. Ellana marched off with the plate of food, carrying them as if they were throwing knives.

They continued eating, sharing stories, laughing when warranted. Lavellan looked fondly at each of his friends. Were they closer to each other, this time? It felt as if they’d built a better rapport with one another. Or maybe this had always been the case and Lavellan was just noticing it now because he was spending more time with them.

He looked around him, regarding the Hall and the visitors within, dignitaries and the common folk alike. His throne wasn’t casting an intimidating shadow this time. In fact, it almost seemed like an afterthought instead of a commanding presence.

Even if the throne were to leave, the homeliness in the Hall would still remain. That atmosphere had been cultivated already.

They would be alright.

He smiled.

Solas never showed up to dinner. Alexius said he’d seen Solas briefly when he’d dropped off a few reports but that was it. Lavellan frowned and went up to his quarters.

Fireplace wasn’t lit.

He closed the door and ascended the stairs, just in case.

Solas was but a silhouette sat on the edge of the bed in the dim room, bowed over his knees with

his head in his hands. Lavellan's letters were on the bed beside him.

Lavellan gripped the railing, considered backtracking and pretending he never saw him.

But he refrained.

He knelt in front of the fireplace instead and spent a while getting a fire going. Once the glow of it had lit up and warmed enough of the room, he dusted off his hands and walked over towards Solas.

"I've finished," said Solas softly, the tone of his voice indiscernible.

Lavellan fidgeted with the hunting charm around his wrist. "You should have spaced them out."

"I could not stop reading."

He considered joking about his writing skills and asking if he could be the next Varric but held back. Instead, he stood quietly, waiting. His heart wasn't hammering, not quite. Falling maybe. On the verge of it.

"Solas—" Lavellan started, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder, but Solas stood. Attempted to. He fell to his knees instead and clutched at Lavellan's shirt, his head hanging.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Solas trembled. Lavellan stood frozen, could only stare as Solas kept shaking and muttering broken apologies, holding onto Lavellan like a sinner clutching at a Chantry mother's robes.

He hadn't known how Solas would react, hadn't known how he'd wanted Solas to react. Was this it? On his knees, reduced to apologies?

Was this what he wanted?

A steady stream of... *something* built in Lavellan's chest. Some unknown emotion. A pointed, simmering sensation of frost and fire alike. It surged up his throat, flooded his mouth, and he gnashed his teeth to keep it inside. But there was too much. Seeing Solas' kneeling, trembling form only worsened it.

What was Lavellan supposed to do with his apologies? In Redcliffe, he'd apologised too, but what good had that done?

"You're not the one I want to hear it from," Lavellan said wretchedly. "And do you think he hasn't apologised already? He apologised but it meant *nothing*. It was just him making his regret known but what good did that do? I don't—I don't need any more apologies from you. I need you to actually make them *mean* something. I—I."

He paused, covered his eyes with his hand. All he'd been saying was, "I," and, "I need," but this wasn't just about him.

Lavellan took a few, deep breaths.

"This isn't on you," said Lavellan. "We've already— We've had our own set of problems, and you've already taken your steps forward. This isn't your responsibility to shoulder."

"He was still *me*. I did those despicable acts." Solas raised his head, a faint echo of despair and rage haunting his gaze. "I am no blank slate, no fresh start. I *was* him before the flow of time had reversed."

Lavellan knelt with him, but he didn't know what else to say. Maybe there was nothing he *could* say.

Solas shook his head, his despair and rage hardening to determination. "No. I'd sworn to correct his course. *My* course. You are right, my words are empty if I cannot match them to action."

He held Lavellan's face with trembling hands.

"I will not be like him," he swore, heated conviction in his voice.

What kind of monster will you be like this time, then? Lavellan thought jadedly, but no, Solas wasn't a monster at heart. He'd had to pretend to be one in Elvhenan to protect his soldiers, to frighten and upset those in power, and then, he had become one in the past timeline because that was how others had seen him. And Solas had seen himself as one too. The monster who'd brought about the end of his home and people.

It had all been a ruse at first. And then, it had become a defining act. A role he'd succumbed to.

Maybe he's not a monster, but what he'd done was still monstrous.

Lavellan stared at him. Was it right to condemn Solas and hold him accountable for things he couldn't recall? At what point do you become a different person?

He didn't know the answer. All he had was hope but no faith.

He wished he had faith.

Lavellan could only give Solas a small smile that he couldn't feel.

"I suppose one consolation we can both have is that I am no longer bound by the Well of Sorrows' geas," said Lavellan.

Solas frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't get the time to tell you, but I met Mythal a few nights ago. The fragment of her dwelling within Flemeth, that is. We... had a discussion. Cleared up a few things regarding the circumstances of my death. To express her regret at my death, she took the geas away. Compensation, if you will."

"So she has freed you," said Solas with a small breath of relief.

"Supposedly."

He frowned. "Supposedly?"

"Maybe it really is an act of goodwill and remorse, but I wouldn't be surprised if it also accomplishes another purpose for later."

"Must there always be a hidden agenda?"

Something prickled beneath his skin. "I don't know, Solas, suggesting that I sacrifice myself to become the eighth seal doesn't exactly endear her to me."

He faltered. "What?"

Lavellan rubbed his eyes. He hadn't been planning on telling Solas, but apparently, he wasn't

above divulging it because of pettiness.

“Manipulate the forces of change within the Fade to place my soul into the broken gate and fix it, presumably, while also stabilising the spell,” said Lavellan. “I suspect she also approached me about it because she knew I’m not averse to soul-manipulating magic.” He smiled. “It’s kind of the blood magic equivalent back in Elvhenan. It’s interesting, isn’t it? We always seem to place a taboo on anything manipulating our inheritance.”

“I know what you are trying to do, and it is not working.” He paused. “But we will discuss that later.”

Lavellan smiled wider.

“Returning to your previous point,” said Solas, “it is out of the question.”

He gave Solas a measuring look.

Solas frowned at his silence. “Mahanon...”

He looked away. “Don’t worry. It’s an absurd suggestion anyway. I’m just saying that I don’t have the same faith in Mythal as you do. Especially not after her death. She feels more like Vengeance than Justice these days.”

“She cares for this world,” he murmured. “She would prioritise it over herself.”

Or kill two birds with one stone. “You know, she does care for the world, I won’t deny that. But she could take a leaf out of Sera and Cole’s books. She’s lost sight of the smaller people.”

Solas looked down, brows furrowing, lips thinning.

Careful. Remember what happened the last time you pushed?

Lavellan clenched his hands over his lap.

“She’s freed me, possibly,” said Lavellan. “Has she freed you?”

“Why do you hold her in such contempt?”

“Why?” His shoulders rose, his teeth grinding. “*Why?* Because she turned you into Pride. She *twisted* you. Purposefully. You know what you told me last time I brought this up? That it was necessary so you could *understand* the suffering that the slaves were going through. Do you hear yourself? That’s fucked up! Why should understanding come at the cost of suffering? At the cost of *you*?”

“Mahanon,” he said again, a warning, trying to turn away.

Lavellan reached for him, cradled his face, held his gaze. “No, vhenan. *Listen.* I know you love her. I know she is dear to you. But what she did to you is not worth your love and understanding.”

“It gave her great sorrow—”

“*You* were sorrowful for what you’d done to me. But where does sorrow get you when you’re not apologetic? Even then, what gives her the right to put someone through great distress so that she could shape them into a person that would work for *her* vision? I don’t care if her plans were ‘righteous’, I don’t care if her situation was difficult. It’s not her right, and it wasn’t right, to have moulded you in that manner. How is she any better than the mages who’d given your friend the

command to fight?”

He bristled. “That is not the same.”

“Why? Because there were no spells? No binding circles? That’s just worse, isn’t it? That all she needed were words and your attachment to her?”

“Did *you* not do the same thing?” he snapped.

A cold band constricted around Lavellan’s ribs and snapped against it.

“You and I are more alike than you may realise.”

Lavellan shook himself out of it and scowled. “No, I didn’t. Don’t lash out at me.”

Solas opened his mouth, closed it. He looked down with a pinch to his brows, his shoulders rigid, posture tense. Like a soldier gearing himself up for battle.

But then, he let out a breath, his posture and expression falling with it.

“I’m sorry,” said Solas. The last of his agitated expression melted away. Now he just looked miserable. “That was uncalled for.”

Lavellan faltered, then lowered his hands from Solas’ face.

“I’m sorry, too,” said Lavellan. “I think I pushed too far again.”

Solas said nothing, still staring at the ground with a tight pull to his lips.

Lavellan could feel his knees beginning to ache, so he gently placed his hands on Solas’ shoulders and urged him up.

“Come on, let’s get on the bed.”

They rose. Solas set the letters aside while Lavellan grabbed the Dalish blanket. He wrapped it around them as they leaned against the headboard and each other. Solas was warm.

He was so tired.

“You died twice,” Solas whispered.

Lavellan laughed wryly. “How many people can say that, huh?”

“I had a hand in both.”

A heavy quiet befell them.

“It was my fault the first time,” Lavellan murmured. “I was hasty, and I paid for it. The blame isn’t with you or Dirthamen.”

“Not entirely, perhaps. But partly.”

“Maybe. I don’t know anymore. It should have just been an argument, but we were balancing a crumbling empire on our backs. The consequences were direr than normal. We couldn’t afford to have a fight like that just as the Evanuris couldn’t afford to squabble like a normal family.”

Then again, Lavellan wasn’t sure if that family had been ‘normal’ or *healthy* in the first place.

Maybe the foundations had already been rotten from the very beginning.

“The price of responsibility,” said Solas. “It was simply unfortunate that the wrong hands were holding the reins of the empire. Most of the Evanuris were still young when they accepted their crowns.”

“Shit, you’re right. I didn’t even think about that. They were what? In their thirties? Andruil would have still been in her late twenties. That’s like handing a teenager a crown.”

“You were young, too. You trained shortly after manifesting, you said. I at least had some semblance of a childhood for a while.” He paused, then made a soft noise of disbelief. “We were speaking of your first life as Mahanon, and now we are speaking of your time in Elvhenan. I am already finding it hard to comprehend. I cannot imagine what it must be like for you. I apologise, that should have been my primary concern.” He frowned at Lavellan. “How... are you?”

“You’re allowed to be concerned about yourself first. You’re allowed to think of yourself first. Who made you believe that your wants and needs are always secondary to everyone else’s?”

“For prioritising your personal desire and attachments over your responsibility and the People!” said Lavellan.

Lavellan paused. Cold horror pooled in his stomach.

“Then you are part of the problem,” Solas said.

He’d been right. Lavellan *had* been a part of the problem. Or— No.

“The fault does not lie with you,” said Solas. “They have twisted your admiration, devotion, and loyalty. They force you to work to the bone in service of a corrupt empire.”

It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t Solas’. They’d all been fucked over by a system that had never cared about them.

“Could the same not be said for you?” asked Solas. “You should not always be secondary to everyone else either.”

“I’m... working on it.”

Solas smiled.

Lavellan offered his hand. “Work on it with me?”

Solas took it and laced their fingers together. “Together.”

“Together.”

He brought Lavellan’s hand to his lips and held it there, eyes closing. Lavellan cradled Solas’ face with his free hand, sweeping his thumb beneath the fan of Solas’ lashes.

“Well,” said Lavellan, “there it is. Everything I’ve been hiding.”

There was relief, undeniably, but there was also the vertigo from feeling vulnerable. He’d carved his secrets so deep into his skin that they had reached and fused with bone, and now it felt as if he’d cut himself open and revealed the gory, bleeding parts of him.

Solas smiled wryly. “In your words, ‘We’re a bit of a mess, aren’t we?’”

Lavellan laughed.

For a while, they said nothing. Lavellan laid his head on Solas' shoulder, felt light for the first time in years. They didn't let go of each other's hand.

But still, there was a looming darkness waiting.

Would Solas really change his course? How else could the poison be dealt with besides Solas' way?

"Do..." Solas started, then paused for a short, silent moment. "The three of us — you, Dirthamen, and I... Did we have any happy memories together?"

"Plenty."

"Will you tell me a few?"

Lavellan thought back and sorted through them, then smiled. "Remember how Mananor — or Rivain, now, I suppose — would throw a festival for the twins?"

"Yes?"

"Well, Falon'Din couldn't come once. Mythal's punishment for him slacking off with his duties."

Solas glanced at Lavellan. "And Dirthamen was attempting to hide that he was upset about his absence, yes. I... remember surprising Dirthamen with my appearance and we spent the day together instead."

"That was my idea. I thought you also needed the break. We also threw candy at him from the rooftops."

His eyes sparked with recognition. "Yes. There was... a boat ride. He bought me a charcoal set."

Lavellan grinned. "Right! I was with the three of you. You bought an obscene amount of cakes and sweets from the food stalls."

"And Dirthamen had skewered intestines."

"I tried to steal some of your food."

Lavellan continued narrating that evening animatedly, reached into the Well of Sorrows to better recall it in detail. Solas asked for another afterwards. Lavellan told him of the time Solas and Dirthamen accidentally blew up a fountain, of the time they saw a play together, of all the stolen moments they could grab in between their duties.

However, when Lavellan mentioned Felassan, Solas tensed beside him.

Lavellan stopped talking.

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

"Solas," said Lavellan, "what happened to Felassan?"

The fire crackled.

Solas bowed his head. "I—" He closed his eyes. "We were conversing in a dream. He was

supposed to have acquired Briala's passcode for the eluvians, but he defied my orders. I lost my temper. I did not know that striking him in the dream would..."

He turned his head away, pained.

"I killed him."

Lavellan already knew, but the admission was still...

Wait.

"While dreaming?" asked Lavellan. "You killed him in the dream? So he isn't dead; he's Tranquil."

He scoffed and opened his eyes. "Tranquillity, I would argue, is a fate worse than death. He felt no hatred, no sorrow, no betrayal, at what I had done to him. He would speak as if I had simply patted his arm. The Felassan we knew is all but gone.

"No." He grabbed Solas' arm. "No, Cassandra said she found a way to reverse it. It was in the book she'd retrieved from Lord Seeker Lucius."

Solas glanced at Lavellan, gaze tentatively hopeful. "I had thought it permanent."

"That's the story circulating about, but the Seekers knew of a way to reverse it. They simply withheld the information."

"To tighten the leash, so to speak."

"We could ask Cassandra about it. I think it involves a spirit. Where is he right now?"

"In one of my strongholds, with the rest of my agents and other awoken Elvhen who were seeking shelter."

Relief and hope flooded Lavellan's throat, his breaths coming out somewhat thin. "There's hope, Solas. We can bring him back once this is all over. Oh, he'll be so proud of what Briala's accomplished." He realised he was grinning. "I'll hug him. I think that would unnerve him a little since I'd always slap his arm away whenever he slung it around my shoulders."

Solas gave him a faint smile. "I think he would be happy to see you."

There would be complications, of course there would be. Lavellan knew by now that nothing would go as smoothly as expected, but the future that had looked so murky and uncertain before now had a hint of light shimmering through.

Lavellan continued telling stories until Solas fell asleep, curled up against Lavellan's side. He stared at Solas, brushed his thumb along his cheek.

To think that at this point in the past timeline, Lavellan had been furious and heartbroken, lying alone in a cold bed, not knowing why Solas had ended their relationship. Now, here they were.

Here they were.

He and Solas took it easy the next day. As easy as they could, anyway. Lavellan sorted out the supplies they'd need for their search for the dragon in the Arbor Wilds tomorrow, then inquired about Corypheus' whereabouts again.

Still nothing.

Lavellan tried to take his mind off it by checking up on everyone again. Everyone was still mostly recovering from their march in the Arbor Wilds. He later snuck a peek into Ellana and Abelas' lesson and saw the two of them sitting quietly at the same table and writing with an intense look of concentration. He sighed in relief and left them to it.

He also returned to the El'amelan's fortress again, tried to dream there and contact Asunara, but there was no response. He'd try again later.

Come nightfall, he and Solas ate in the bedroom and shared more stories or clarifications.

They slept holding one another tight.

In the morning, Lavellan listened to the Well, then the two of them armoured themselves. He slipped the grounding stone and earring into his inner pockets, wore the halla bone amulet and Revasha's charm, secured his weapons in place, and wore the raven cloak.

Blackwall, Dorian, and Bull were already waiting at the door to the eluvian chamber when Solas and Lavellan arrived. Vergala swooped down from the skies and perched on Lavellan's shoulder.

"Supplies and mounts already got sent through," said Bull.

"Good," said Lavellan, then paused. "Sera?"

Blackwall shook his head. "Haven't seen her."

Lavellan eyed the sun in the sky. It was already mid-morning.

"Right," he said, tried not to let his dejection show. "Let's go—"

A slamming sound echoed throughout the garden and they glanced towards the source. It was one of the doors. Sera came dashing out of it.

She skidded to a stop in front of them.

"Slept in," she said, slightly out of breath. "Dragons, yeah? Let's go." She marched on ahead and fell into step beside Blackwall.

Lavellan smiled.

Chapter End Notes

HEY THERE'S [DIRTHAVELLAN ART](#) FROM THE LOVELY H4RDC1DER. Thank

you, I love it, it's lovely, I screamed in absolute joy when I saw it :')

But man, I was stuck on this chapter for weeks ;-;

Arguing with Solas about Mythal round 2! Also, the festival that lavellan tells solas about happens in [this tapestry of stars piece](#).

Lavellan, thinking: *i will keep this information about mythal's back-up plan a secret*

Solas: Mythal is great, actually

Lavellan, running on spite: *i changed my mind*

Cheers, Lavellan

(can u believe that it has been 364 days since the 'lavellan is an ancient elf' reveal chapter was published? coz i sure as hell can't! what do u mean it's been a year??)

The inherent homoeroticism of staffs

Chapter Notes

Listen, the chapter title was initially a placeholder but i just kept it anyway coz it made me laugh

Also, we have crossed 500k words! :')

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a vision and a breath

The Sentinels let them pass through the temple. A few even nodded at Lavellan and Solas.

“So, where to, Mercy?” asked Bull once they were out of the temple and back into the dense forest of the Wilds, sitting atop their horses.

He consulted the Well quickly. “East. Until we reach a stream. Then follow it up.” He raised his arm and Vergala hopped onto it from his shoulder. “Scout for me, if you please. Let me know if we’re on the right track. Warn us of any danger if you can as well.”

She cawed and took off.

They rode east. After a while, they encountered another cluster of ruins, crumbled arches half-buried in the soil, overgrown with ferns.

“This a new place?” asked Bull.

“It is most likely still a part of the temple,” said Solas.

“It must have been quite large in its time, then,” said Dorian. “The question is: how large?”

“Almost the size of a small city,” Solas answered. “A temple would also be the dwelling of the priesthood, so it stands to reason that it would be large enough to supply necessary and frivolous amenities alike.”

“Frivolous? Priests were frivolous?”

“They do not live the humble lives of most parishioners within the Chantry. The High Priests often trumped the nobility in terms of the social hierarchy. They were more involved with the general public, considered the link between the gods and the masses. Thus, they exercised more influence. They also had their own political sphere.”

Blackwall grunted. “They should be setting an example, removing themselves from all of that headache. Especially if the people are looking to them for guidance.”

“Should be,” said Solas. “But their hearts were ruled by ambition and avarice.”

“Put anyone at the roof and they’ll stop seeing the floor,” said Sera. “Those ones just get to sing rubbish and have people believe it. Or at least, tell them that’s the right way to sing. Anyone can

sing. Like shite, maybe, but still. Singing.” She scratched the back of her head and frowned. “I’m hungry.”

Blackwall passed her some of his jerky and she happily tore into it.

“What was it like, I wonder,” mused Dorian. “Having your gods present? It would be like Andraste still being well and alive today.”

“No different than having a sovereign ruler present,” said Solas.

“Yes, but see, nobody is making statues of Empress Celene or worshipping it.”

“Gods forbid,” muttered Lavellan.

“Better comparison would be Mercy,” said Bull.

Lavellan made a face. “Not a god though. I’m just... some unfortunate bastard.”

“Yeah, but one that people worship. Give it a year and you’ll find shrines of you.”

He most certainly would. It already made him feel ill.

“It would be easy to feel abandoned by the gods if you were aware that they were present and yet your prayers were going unanswered,” murmured Solas.

“Elves, elves, elves,” said Sera, chewing around her jerky. “All pearly towers and gold walls, but it’s all really just piss, innit?”

“Not all,” said Solas, clipped. “There were good people within that empire, people who still tried to do good.”

“Sure, but that just means they drown in the muck. Shite is shite. Alleys are alleys. Starving people are starving people. And why? Because some sacks at the top think the seats there are soft on the butt. Bet the gods were real arses too.”

Blackwall cleared his throat and elbowed her. Lavellan could feel some of them shooting him a look.

How was he supposed to respond to that?

“Maybe,” he said after a few seconds of silence. “But now, it’s more about what they mean to the elves and their ties to our culture.”

Solas glanced at him. “Even if they were terrible people?”

“You can’t just rip people’s faiths away from them.”

“You’d rather the Dalish don’t know the truth?”

“That’s not what I said.” Lavellan’s grip on the reins tightened. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

“An empire is always ruled by an asshole, is what I’m learning today,” said Bull.

“If you weren’t already an asshole, then it turns you into one,” said Lavellan. “Still, that doesn’t remove what they mean to us. It’s just... difficult to swallow. People will come to terms with it in a

different way.”

“Have you come to terms with it?” Bull asked softly.

Lavellan frowned and contemplated it. Had he? He’d been disillusioned in the beginning, and now, he’d lost his faith in them since he’d known who they were and what they were like. They weren’t gods.

“I don’t believe in the people they were anymore,” he said. “But I still believe in what they mean and the values they embody.” Or were supposed to embody. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Their group fell quiet.

“Well! This is a mite depressing,” said Dorian after a while. “Let’s change the topic.”

They changed the topic. Lavellan shot Dorian a grateful look and he bowed his head graciously in response.

The conversation soon landed in the realm of sex jokes, but considering his current company, he was only surprised that it had taken that long.

After a while of riding through the forest, Vergala returned.

“Stream,” she cawed. *You’re on the right path.*

“Thank you.” He rubbed the underside of her beak and offered her some edible berries he’d picked along the way. She ate then returned to the skies. “Alright, let’s keep following her.”

The others played ‘I Spy’ but Sera kept changing her answers, so they gave up. They all eventually fell into pairs, riding side by side. Blackwall and Sera were giggling and whispering to each other as always behind them while Bull and Solas were riding ahead. Lavellan pulled his horse up beside Dorian.

“So,” said Lavellan, “suddenly found your hidden love for fighting dragons?”

He chuckled dryly. “Not quite. There was... I learned something. A Qunari custom.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, you show your commitment to your lover by crafting a matching necklace from the same dragon tooth, broken in half.”

Lavellan pursed his lips. “About that. We’re not supposed to kill this dragon. Just subdue it long enough for me to tame it.”

Dorian paused, then groaned, covering his face and throwing his head back. “Well, you could have told me *that!*”

“I didn’t know that was what you wanted to do!”

“Keep your voice down!”

“Don’t worry, he and Solas are too busy comparing whose dick is bigger via mental chess to overhear.”

Dorian made an unimpressed noise. “It’s useless if they don’t even put it to good use.”

Lavellan raised a brow. “Bull’s not putting it to good use?”

“Heard my name,” said Bull, looking back at them. “What’d you say? Produce?”

Dorian waved him off. “You’re hearing things.”

Bull shrugged and turned away. Dorian slapped Lavellan’s arm in warning.

“Ow,” he laughed. “Okay okay. Maybe we could... knock a tooth off during the fight?”

“Have you seen the size of their teeth?”

“Alright, fine. If it doesn’t work out, I’ve heard rumours of a dragon in the Storm Coast. We can always travel there when we have free time.” He paused. “Alternatively, we should still have dragon remains from the dragon we’d fought in the Approach.”

“I want to earn it,” huffed Dorian.

“You still fought that dragon with us.”

“You know what I mean.”

“We’ll see how it goes.”

Maybe he could politely ask the dragon, “Excuse me o’ great and powerful guardian of Mythal’s altar, could you please knock one tooth loose for us, thank you,” and hope he wouldn’t get eaten for it.

“What about you?” asked Dorian. “Any romantic overtures you require assistance with?”

“I’ll let you know.”

Although, now that Dorian brought it up, Lavellan and Solas hadn’t had the opportunity to spend time together lately. *Without* the stress of world-shaking information. Surely he and Solas could do something nice together. Did they have time? It would take them until the afternoon to reach the altar because he’d wanted them to stop halfway through and rest up for the fight, so maybe he could grab Solas for a nice walk then or something.

When they reached a suitable enough place, Lavellan called for them to rest and they dismounted, set up what supplies they needed to have lunch and rest.

The sun was past its zenith when they finished. Lavellan dusted his hands off and stood, turned to search for Solas—

“And he’s gone,” said Lavellan dryly. “Hey, Bull? Where’s Solas?”

“Gone to get firewood, I think,” he answered, finished building the campfire.

“Blackwall and Sera are getting the firewood.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “I don’t know then. He’ll probably be back soon.”

“I suppose.”

Sera and Blackwall returned with the firewood and they got a fire roaring, but still no Solas. Lavellan gave it a few more minutes before his worry caught up to him.

“I’ll go make sure he didn’t get lost,” said Lavellan. “I’ll send Vergala back if I think there’s trouble.”

He went into the forest and searched for a while, passing beneath patches of shade from the canopy of the trees.

Vergala flew overhead from time to time, mostly doing her own thing. A few colourful birds hopped away from him whenever he got too close and he smiled down at them. Didn’t Dirthamen hate these birds? It was for such a petty reason as well.

“Its droppings landed on me once,” he said. “I have never forgiven the species since.”

Lavellan laughed. “I don’t think one bird shitting on you merits your hatred of the entire species.”

“I was twelve. I was talking to someone I fancied. It was mortifying.”

Lavellan snorted, a wide and fond smile pulling at his lips.

A pang of missing shot through him.

His smile faded.

He stared at the birds for a while longer until they flew away, and still, Lavellan kept staring up at the trees, his hand hovering over where the earring was resting.

Twigs and leaves crunched from somewhere behind him.

“Vhenan?”

Lavellan blinked, turned his head and saw Solas.

“Is everything alright?” asked Solas.

“Oh, yes! I was just—” He paused, looked down. “No, some things aren’t really alright. I’m far too exhausted to tackle them at the moment though. Anyway, I was looking for you. You were gone for a while and I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He noticed the short branch Solas was holding. “Firewood...?”

Solas smiled. “Please do not throw this into the fire, it took me a while to find it.” He walked closer so he could show it to Lavellan. “This wood is similar to my staff in that it is exceptionally responsive to magic.”

“Oh, okay. Were you going to get Dagna to have a look at it?”

“No.” He placed it in Lavellan’s hand and he felt the faint hum of the ambient magic within it.

“This is for you.”

Lavellan looked at him, tried not to be too starry-eyed about it, but suspected he was failing. “Wait, really?”

“You need a staff to help you become accustomed to manipulating the Fade by proxy. And since

this wood is responsive, you may change its length and hide it.”

He twirled the branch in his hand, beamed at Solas. “I think it’s lesson time.”

“Now?”

“Now! It’s also a date. We’re going on a date.”

He chuckled. “All of a sudden?”

“I realised we haven’t really spent that much time together lately because of the preparations for the Arbor Wilds. It’d be nice to have some time to ourselves. *Without* somebody crying or breaking down into apologies.”

“I suppose it is true when they say that emotional vulnerability is the executioner of romance.”

“*Nobody* says that.”

“I say that.”

Lavellan walked deeper into the forest and Solas followed.

“If you’re trying to seduce me by being grim and fatalistic,” said Lavellan, “it isn’t working.”

“I am not trying to.” He slipped his hand into Lavellan’s free one and pulled him to his chest, resting his hand on the small of Lavellan’s back to steady him. “I have already seduced you.”

Lavellan lightly knocked the staff against Solas’ head. “Don’t be too full of yourself.”

“We are on a date, and you are in my arms.” Solas smiled smugly. “I’m afraid you *have* fallen for my grim and fatalistic charm.”

“That’s not the achievement that you think it is,” Lavellan said with a laugh and they walked again, hand in hand.

“I beg to differ.”

“Then beg.”

Solas pinched his side.

Lavellan gaped at him in offence. “Did you just pinch me?”

They walked through the forest for a while longer in search of a good place to stop at and train, speaking of whatever would come to mind, laughing more often than not.

Lavellan stopped once he heard the faint trickle of water.

He followed the sound and pulled Solas along.

“Careful,” said Solas as Lavellan made his way down an incline, grabbing onto the roots of the trees for support.

“This way!” he urged.

He navigated his way through, felt the moisture in the air the further he followed the trickling sounds. The trickle soon became a rush. Lavellan grinned once he spied the rushing water through the underbrush, wove his way through the plants, and arrived at a waterfall. It was a small one, running down a tier of rocks and settling into the pool in front of him, then running down another level into the stream below.

“I hope you remember your way back,” said Solas, standing beside him.

“I’ll just call Vergala if we get lost.”

“How she has endured you for thousands of years, I will never know.”

Lavellan leaned his arm on Solas’ shoulder. “She probably endured for the same reason you did.”

“And what is the reason?”

He leaned more of his weight against him. “You *love* me,” he said, drawling out the word.

Solas tried to look annoyed but failed, lips pulling into a small smile instead. “Very well, I will concede.”

“Victory is mine.” He hung up his coat and cloak on a nearby tree and danced over the small rocks jutting out from the pool of water, reached the large one in the middle. It was relatively flat and could be stood on well enough. Solas followed him and stared at the waterfall with a serene expression.

“You follow me to dangerous locations way too readily,” said Lavellan.

“I am amassing bad habits, I’m finding.”

“Are you calling me a bad habit?”

Solas glanced at him. “Aren’t you?”

“I’m not a habit.”

He regarded Lavellan for a few seconds, then smiled, the look in his eyes resigned yet wondering.

“No,” Solas agreed. “You are a vision.”

Lavellan stared, ears warming, lips parting, searching for a response and finding none. He cleared his throat and looked away instead.

“So what’s first on the agenda?” asked Lavellan, still refusing to meet Solas’ gaze, but he could *feel* his smile widening. Solas stood behind Lavellan.

“Hold out the staff,” Solas instructed. Lavellan did so. Solas placed his hand on top of Lavellan’s and squeezed gently. “Not so tight.”

Lavellan loosened his grip.

“This is how to extend it,” Solas continued, slid his hand from Lavellan’s to the staff. “Let it flood with your magic. Coax it. You do not require much. A steady pace should suffice, so long as it remains consistent.”

And because Lavellan couldn't resist, he asked, "Which staff are we talking about?"

"Not mine at the rate you are going."

Lavellan burst out laughing. "And why not?"

"You have not even learned how to operate yours. I am not letting you near mine unless you show competence."

"Oh, believe me," he purred, turned his head and smiled, "I *know* how to handle yours."

Solas stared at him coolly. "Pay attention, vun'lin."

The nickname caught him by surprise and silenced him. He hadn't heard that in a while.

He busied himself with examining the staff. Solas laughed behind him.

"You capitulated so quickly," said Solas. "Is that all it takes, vun'lin?"

"Shut up."

He rested his hands on Lavellan's hips and leaned in, brushed his lips down the side of Lavellan's neck. "Does the name remind you of something? Would you mind sharing?"

Lavellan resisted burying his face in his hands. "You were present too. Remember it yourself."

He laughed again, warm breaths fanning over Lavellan's skin. "It would be very hard to forget."

Lavellan released his magic and ignored the heat in his ears, focusing on ensuring his magical output remained controlled. Golden light flooded in between the grooves of the wood. The staff lengthened. Its ends unfurled then curled in layers.

"Your ears are reddening," said Solas.

"This is some piss-poor teaching, Solas. Look, I'm doing all the work myself." He experimented with the staff size, tried to push how long he could make it, and stopped once he heard the wood complaining.

"I need not teach you much. You already know a majority of the theory. All that remains is modifying your casting."

"Okay, so what's next?" Fireball maybe. Or water since they were already beside it. Ice? Maybe not lightning just yet.

"Barriers."

Lavellan sagged, shot him a surly look. "Barriers. Seriously?"

"It is an imperative skill. Especially considering your penchant for attracting danger."

"Danger just can't get enough of me, huh? I'll tell it I'm taken."

"How relieving."

Lavellan grinned.

"Besides," said Solas, "how one constructs a barrier is telling of a mage's stability, precision,

endurance, and willpower. This is also a good start to accustom you to the Veil being channelled within your staff first. You do not have the liberty of being able to work with any staff, so you must choose those with a high conductibility until you can acclimate.”

“I *could* just cast with my hands.”

“I would rather any backfiring spells destroys wood over your body.”

“I can use blood magic then. More stable.”

“Vhenan.”

“I’m kidding.” Mostly. He sighed. “Alright. What’s the first step?”

“The first step is posture.” He slipped his foot between Lavellan’s legs and spread them apart. Lavellan’s brows raised. “You must be grounded. Second: focus. Do you know what the third step is?”

He had to swallow before he could answer. “Willpower, but I’m sure I have it covered. After all, I have an, what was it you said?” His tone grew teasing. “*Indomitable will?*”

Solas grew very, very quiet.

The waterfall trickled.

“Indomitable focus,” Solas corrected. “But now that you mention it... Yes. Presumably.”

“Presumably? You’re not convinced?”

“Oh, I am convinced.” He leaned closer, chest to Lavellan’s back, voice right by his ear. “But opinions may change in light of new information. I am willing to research.”

Lavellan bit back a smile. “And what would your research entail?”

“I am unsure yet, but I know the results will be fascinating. For now, go on. Show me this indomitable will and focus of yours.”

“Gladly,” he said, channelled the Fade into his staff, and the air around them shimmered in response. Ambient magic gathered and thickened. Primed.

“Good,” murmured Solas. Lavellan smiled to himself.

With the staff acting as a conduit, Lavellan was finally able to better grasp the energy of the Fade, but the Veil was still fighting his attempts to actually manipulate it.

“Don’t fight,” said Solas. “You are not hammering it into shape; you are convincing it. It will not be direct, or as accurate as you would like, but you will have to make do. Like pulling the strings of a puppet. The movements will be stilted, but what matters is that you are making it move.”

But—

“Let go,” said Solas. “It is the same with change. You cannot control the ripples; only their place of origin.”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered. Solas chuckled.

Still, Lavellan did what he could. Thinking about it like change did help, somewhat. You could only pull and push at certain points and guess at what the ripples would be. And little by little, he constructed a barrier.

“That’s it,” Solas encouraged.

The air shimmered once again, then solidified, and the familiar glow of a barrier flashed and coated them. He almost staggered as the spell drained most of his mana, but Solas was steadying him.

“It will be taxing at first,” said Solas. “You will slowly regain your stores of mana over time.”

Lavellan examined the barrier around them. It was brittle and thin. He pressed his lips into a displeased line.

“I had really nice barriers,” said Lavellan. “Sturdy, but flexible.”

“This is a good first attempt. That you were able to manage it on the first try is already commendable.”

“When did you manage it?”

“First.”

“Of course you did.”

“Try again, if you’ve the mana for it.”

“I do.” He brought it down, then set to building another.

Ambient magic gathered once more and Lavellan didn’t fight the Veil this time—

Solas slipped his hand beneath Lavellan’s shirt and Lavellan yelped at the coldness of his touch. The gathering ambient magic scattered.

“Hm,” said Solas and retracted his hand.

“You dick, your hand was *cold!*”

“I was testing your focus.”

“Test, my ass. The terrible Dread Wolf had an ulterior motive, luring the poor, helpless Inquisitor to the middle of the forest so he could feel him up.”

“Is that the narrative you wish to spin?”

“Let’s do fireballs next. *You* can be the target.”

Solas rested his chin on Lavellan’s shoulder and laughed. “I will stop teasing,” he promised. “Come now, vun’lin, try again.”

Lavellan muttered beneath his breath and resecured his grip on his staff, resumed building a barrier.

Still, as annoying as the Veil was, Lavellan had to admit that it was a feat of... genius? Would genius be the right word for this? Clever. The concept had been sound, but alas, Solas had had no

time to experiment and determine its adverse effects.

“You know, vhenan,” said Lavellan, “the Veil may have been quite a detriment, but it’s actually quite magically ingenious too.”

“I had the focus.”

“The focus lends power, not ingenuity.” Lavellan plucked at the Veil and placed it into the necessary formation. It was difficult translating his knowledge of magic, but the general concepts were similar. The barrier shimmered around them once again. His mana drained. “There. That’s more exhausting than it should be.”

“You always do that,” said Solas, his tone softer.

“What? Exhaust myself?”

He huffed out a laugh and wrapped his arms around Lavellan. “That, too. But no, I meant... you always identify the positive traits of my creations.”

“You’re critical enough about them for the both of us. Someone needs to remind you that you do manage remarkable things.” He turned in the embrace so he could face Solas. “The Veil... *was* destructive, I won’t sugar-coat it. Impulsive. But I know you’ve already beaten yourself over the head with that. I just don’t think anyone has told you what an impressive feat it was. Your mind is... brilliant. It always has been. I’m just sorry that the consequences this time were so dire.”

Solas smiled wryly. “I always knew my last-minute tricks would one day bring trouble.”

“Let’s aim to avoid last-minute tricks this time, yes?”

Solas rested his head in the crook of Lavellan’s shoulder. “That would be ideal.”

Lavellan smiled and rested his free hand on the back of Solas’ head.

“See?” said Lavellan. “The Dread Wolf *has* brought me here for a *terrible* reason — a hug!”

Solas’ shoulders shook from quiet laughter. “I thought it was to feel you up?”

“That too. You come with not one, but *two* ulterior motives! I am shocked. That’s dreadful.”

“There is nowhere left to run now, o’ great Inquisitor.”

Lavellan grinned. “And so, the Dread Wolf has taken me. What do you plan to do with me now?”

“I had a few ideas.”

“Mind sharing?”

Solas raised his head and smiled at him.

He pushed Lavellan into the water.

“Ass!” Lavellan shrieked as he fell with a splash. He pulled himself back up with his staff, soaked, the water only coming up to his mid-thigh. Solas laughed. Not for long though. Lavellan rested his staff on the rock then yanked Solas into the water by the arm. He had the pleasure of watching Solas flail ungracefully for a few seconds.

“You—!” cried Solas, tried to grab him. Lavellan cackled and splashed him in the face, then ran away, kicking up water in his haste. Solas wiped his face and chased after him.

“A little slow there, fen’lin,” Lavellan taunted, dodged as Solas shot his hand out.

Solas gave Lavellan an unimpressed look. He closed his outstretched hand.

The water around Lavellan tightened and rose, encircling his hips and holding him in place.

“What—”

Solas pulled his hand back and the water tugged Lavellan back. He fought against it.

A jet of water sprayed him in the face and interrupted his struggle. The water around his hips yanked him back and delivered him to Solas.

“That’s cheating!” said Lavellan, sputtering, wiping water from his face.

Solas wrapped his arms around Lavellan from behind again and hummed in satisfaction. “Now you see the importance of knowing how to cast a barrier?”

“Ugh.” He tipped his head back against Solas’ shoulder. “You’re annoying. You have to dry me, by the way.”

“Yes, yes.”

“My personal dryer.”

“I truly feel valued.”

“You should.”

Chapter End Notes

They may go on a waterfall date. as a treat after all that crying hhahaa.

Hey, were you victimised by noverture when you were put through lavellan's death scene? Wish things could have turned out differently for our Sad Elf Sandwich? Well, congrats because lunarthedragon has [made an AU](#) where one, small variable changes:

Dirthamen is too late to stop Lavellan's descent to Entropy and Lavellan escapes. No 'trial', no execution. The story now heads towards a different direction. A... 'Forgotten' direction, if you will ;)

Planning the AU was a teamwork between Lunar and I, expanding even further on the lore, world, and characters within itfoyl canon, but the new characters are solely theirs and I was just along for the awesome ride with occasional inputs here and there! :D Show them some love and support please!

The guardian of the altar

Chapter Notes

YOOOO CHAPTER 100 BABY

Self-care checkpoint <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

the ripples of change

They dried themselves and made their way back to camp, where the others were already cooking the brined beef for lunch.

“There you two are,” said Dorian. “You were gone for a while. We were starting to wonder if we should look for you two. Here, eat.” He passed them a portion of the corned beef with sliced potatoes and carrots.

“Solas pushed me into a stream,” grumbled Lavellan as he took the offered food.

“Careful, it almost sounds as if you’re implying Solas knows how to have fun.”

Lavellan grinned. “You’ll be surprised at the mischief he can achieve.”

“Hush,” said Solas and they ate.

Afterwards, they rested for a bit longer. It was Dorian and Bull’s turn for a romantic promenade through the forest, though Dorian had sniffed at Lavellan when he’d jokingly referred to it as such, while Solas approached Blackwall. Lavellan overheard the soft beginnings of an apology from Solas. He was wearing the same look he’d worn when he’d watched his argument with Dirthamen. Maybe he was apologising for the things he’d said after Blackwall’s revelation.

Lavellan looked away and granted them privacy.

That left him with Sera. She had her knees pulled up to her chest, poking at the coals of the campfire with a branch.

Nobody spoke.

Lavellan shifted, kept shooting her glances, but she wouldn’t meet his eyes. He watched the fire instead.

After a few seconds, Sera rummaged into her pack then shot her arm out at Lavellan, a strip of jerky in her clenched fist. She still wasn’t looking at him. He blinked, bewildered. She didn’t retract her hand. He almost said that he was full, but her face was scrunching with every second of silence, so he accepted the offered jerky instead. He tore it in two and gave half to her.

She snorted to herself. “Quisitiree,” she muttered, but took it anyway. They ate in silence.

Blackwall gave Solas a solid pat on the shoulder and murmured something, then they parted ways.

Sera got up and started annoying Blackwall again. Solas sat beside Lavellan.

“Everything alright?” asked Lavellan.

“Making amends. I was harsh.” He stared down at his hands. “You know the saying, don’t you? The healer has the bloodiest hands?”

“Pain can’t be healed without first accepting it.” Lavellan smiled up at the canopies wryly. “If only the acceptance process wasn’t such a bitch to get through.”

The colourful birds from earlier flew overhead.

Lavellan’s smile faded. His fingers ghosted over where the earring was in his inner pocket. The void in his chest ached.

“I miss Dirthamen,” Lavellan admitted softly.

Solas paused, then bowed his head, quiet.

“Sorry,” said Lavellan. “I... probably shouldn’t talk about him. If it makes things weird.” He gave a weak laugh. “Don’t talk about your ex in front of your current lover and all.”

He shook his head. “Is that truly your concern? Or is it that you are unwilling to see how deep the wound goes?”

“How do *you* feel about my past with Dirthamen?”

“You are evading.”

“I’m curious.”

“Are you thinking I may be jealous?”

Lavellan smiled. “It’s the most common emotion with things like these.”

“I am. But not in the way you are thinking.” He leaned back on his hands. “I am jealous of you, in actuality. You hold all these memories while mine is damaged, unreliable. You tell me of these fond memories, and I am glad for it, but I wish...”

“You wish that you can remember them for yourself, I understand.”

“As for your relationship with Dirthamen... Did he treat you well?”

“He did.” His voice and gaze softened. “He did.”

“Then that is all I need to know.”

Lavellan frowned. “Are you really fine with it?”

Solas went quiet again, brows scrunching slightly as he stared at the campfire. After a while, he sighed.

“I am angry still,” said Solas. “I know my memories are incorrect, but even so, the emotions have not been damaged. There is a rage within me.” His hands clenched over his lap and his eyes hardened. “A sense of abandonment.”

The fire crackled. A faint birdcall echoed through the trees.

“We had sworn to fight together. Had sworn absolute transparency. I now know the reason for the change in his demeanour, but I feel as if that has made that situation worse. People grieve differently, however...” His clenched hands tightened. “I was reaching out to him. I likely needed someone to grieve with. But he’d *abandoned* me to my grief.”

Lavellan’s heart twisted.

Solas closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. He unclenched his hands.

“Of course, his actions require some measure of understanding,” said Solas, “and this... abandonment I feel may be irrational, however—” he gave Lavellan a grim smile— “it is still painful.”

All Lavellan could do was place his hand over Solas’ and squeeze.

“We’re a walking bag of wounds, aren’t we?” Lavellan murmured.

“Indeed.” Solas ran his fingers through Lavellan’s hair, took out the loosened hair tie, and retied it for him. He smiled at Lavellan. “There. Is that better?”

Lavellan smiled back. “Yes, thank you.”

Their group rode until they reached the stream, followed Vergala against its flow, and soon reached the elven ruins. They dismounted and tied their horses to the nearby trees and reached into their supplies to gear up.

“Ready?” asked Lavellan.

At everyone’s nods, he walked into the ruins.

Sunlight rained down the clearing where the remains of Mythal’s altar stood, her dragon-headed and winged statue governing over the ruins, statues of howling wolves flanking her. The flora had overtaken the area, growing over the walls and the statue.

“What’s with the head?” asked Sera.

“Mythal was associated with dragons,” said Lavellan. “They considered dragons the form of the gods, so much so that shapeshifting into one was prohibited unless you were an Evanuris.”

“They *banned* dragons?” asked Blackwall.

Lavellan laughed. “They didn’t ban dragons. Just banned shapeshifting into one, not that you can shapeshift into a dragon that easily. Shapeshifting’s a difficult art. But they were prohibited from performing it if they could.”

But the Well of Sorrows had that knowledge.

Alas, Lavellan couldn’t even shapeshift into a raven. Never mind a dragon. The amount of power required for that was also ridiculous.

Still, he'd used that prohibition to his advantage and had gotten one of the nobles persecuted for it. All he'd needed to do was acquire Ghilan'nain's help in persuading the noble to pursue the knowledge and transform. Mythal hadn't taken kindly to it and had him punished.

Lavellan's mood darkened. Man had it coming. He'd touched one of the El'amelan.

"It's fascinating how we all seem to be in agreement that dragons are symbols of divinity," said Dorian, snapping Lavellan out of his stormy mood.

"They're big, they're strong," said Bull. "Pure power."

"True."

Lavellan stared up at Mythal's statue, the Well of Sorrows whispering her invocation in his mind.

"We few who travel far, call to me and I will come," said Lavellan. "Without mercy, without fear."

"Cry havoc in the moonlight," Solas continued. "Let the fire of vengeance burn. The cause is clear."

Gods, he hoped Mythal wouldn't decide to show up again just to spite him. He'd had his fill of her presence for a good decade.

Bull grunted at Solas. "How'd you know that too?"

"I taught him," Lavellan lied.

"Why wasn't this altar at Mythal's temple?" asked Dorian.

"You praise at temples," said Lavellan. "You offer at temples. But you don't talk to the god, not typically. This altar, however, was where the elves spoke to her, and where she answered."

"Like a ruler receiving an audience."

"Exactly."

"So, what now?" asked Bull. "Where's the dragon?"

Lavellan turned and regarded the empty clearing.

"I'm here," he announced, and they waited. The others' hands hovered above their weapons, eyes on the sky.

Nothing.

Lavellan frowned.

"Hey, Mercy," said Bull, "maybe you have to say something... bigger? Some kind of speech?"

Lavellan opened his mouth—

An ear-splitting screech rent through the air.

A golden dragon zipped overhead, her scales gleaming under the sun. Bull cackled and materialised the prismatic blade of his axe.

"Never mind!" he said.

“You all remember the strategy?” asked Lavellan. A chorus of affirmatives. “Remember not to hurt her too badly. She’s going to have to fight Corypheus’ pet later.”

Sera drew her bow, trained it at the dragon looping back around to fly at them.

“Belly, right?” she asked and shot.

The arrow hit the dragon’s underside and exploded. The dragon roared.

“What’s this one spit out?” asked Blackwall, shield and sword out.

“Fire,” said Lavellan.

Sera shot more explosive arrows to irritate her further, until they spotted the tell-tale signs of landing.

Dorian and Solas laid out ice mines across the space.

The guardian landed, one of her legs activating a mine. A wall of spiked ice burst from the ground and she shrieked, hopped back.

Lavellan shot his hook and chain out and wrapped it around her hind leg, shot forward. Sera stood back and fired arrows. Bull and Blackwall stood in front to keep her attention on them while Dorian and Solas aimed ice spells at her legs and wings to stop her from taking flight again.

Lavellan smashed a flask of frost over his breastplate. The chill frosted the scales on her legs.

He slashed, but her scales deflected his blades. He didn't stop, kept wearing away at it.

She roared fire at Bull and Blackwall.

Dorian and Solas raised a barrier to protect them. Bull and Blackwall swerved and flanked either side of her neck, slashed, but they were unable to cut through the tough hide.

She shrieked and thrashed, slammed her horns into Blackwall. Lavellan ducked in time to avoid her sweeping tail, but she knocked her hind leg into him before he could recover and staggered him, wind forced out of his lungs. His amulet’s barrier flashed around him.

Lavellan gasped for breath, his lungs spasming from the hit, but he kept moving.

She roared fire in a sweeping arc as she hopped away.

“Shit!” cried Bull and dove with a cackle as the flames scorched the tips of his horns.

The dragon retreated, her movements slowed by the frost over her legs from Lavellan's flask and the mages' spells, and landed on another ice mine. Ice burst and scraped against her leg.

She shrieked once more.

Sera shot an explosive arrow into her open maw. It exploded. Her shrieks cut off. Lavellan grimaced.

The dragon staggered, shook her head and spat out the arrow, disoriented. Blackwall put his all into it as he smashed his shield into the side of her head, knocked it to the side.

Lavellan caught his breath and shot forward on his chain towards her hind leg again.

He stabbed his daggers into the flesh. The scales weakened by the frost gave and his daggers slipped in. He apologised briefly and wrenched them.

She roared to the skies, revealed the vulnerable underside of her neck.

Sera shot at it. Bull and Blackwall swung their weapons.

They drew blood.

Lavellan yanked his daggers out just as she backed away, blindly snapping her jaws and sweeping her tail. She stomped her legs. Lavellan scrambled back, barely avoiding a large leg from crushing his ribs.

That should be enough.

“Back up!” Lavellan ordered and they backed away.

He looped a chain around her horns and zipped forward.

She bucked and thrashed her head, sent him shooting up at the sky. The chain unlooped from her horns.

“Shit!” cried Lavellan.

“Mercy!”

“Inquisitor!”

Lavellan fell.

The dragon’s back fast approached.

Fuck—

A buffer of wind pressed against him from below and his swift descent became controlled. Magic wrapped around him. Solas.

He glanced at Solas, his hand outstretched towards Lavellan. The wind whipped at him, his heart lurching and his stomach swooping at the familiar sensation of falling. His cloak fluttered behind him like wings.

Lavellan slowly let out a breath and raised his daggers over his head.

He landed on the dragon’s neck, Solas’ magic cushioning his fall, and he buried his blades into the spaces between her plated scales.

She roared.

Lavellan swiftly removed his daggers, slipped off her neck and landed into a roll. He stood, panting. The guardian backed away, her molten eyes trained on him, head lowered in aggression. Blood slipped in thin strands from her mouth.

He called on the Well of Sorrows and established a connection with her. An awareness settled over him like a coat, the dragon’s will brushing against his, meeting but not intermingling. He lowered his daggers and bowed his head.

The dragon's aggression slowly faded and she raised her head.

Lavellan chanced a step forward. When she didn't back away or bristle, he kept going until he was standing in front of her.

Are we worthy? he asked.

She made a low, rumbling sound at the back of her throat, and he sensed her approval. With that, she turned away and stretched her thawing wings.

Last time, the dragon had died fighting Corypheus' dragon. She hadn't been at full strength, unable to heal fully from the injuries Lavellan and his companions had dealt her. Perhaps this time...

Wait, he called. *Will you stay and let us heal you?*

The dragon looked back at him, their eyes meeting. Something intense shone behind those eyes, a wild sort of intelligence. She made another rumbling noise and limped forward, then lay herself down, her agreement brushing against him. He smiled and faced his companions.

"Solas, Dorian, could you help with healing her, please?" he asked. "Everyone else, come on. I need your help removing the arrows and cleaning the wounds."

The dragon raised her head to show the arrow that Sera had shot into her neck. Solas applied a spell to numb the area and Lavellan worked on removing the arrow as gently as possible. It wouldn't have done too much damage to the surrounding tissue since he'd asked Sera to bring the arrows with the sleek tips.

Once Lavellan pulled the arrow out, Bull shuffled closer experimentally with the healing supplies.

"Stop gawking and help clean the wounds," sighed Dorian.

"I think I'm gonna cry," said Bull, voice thick as he wiped the blood on her neck away. "Really sorry about the cut, ma'am."

"Did you just call the dragon ma'am?" asked Blackwall, gentle as he tended to the wound he'd dealt.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"You're so weird," said Sera, wary as she touched the dragon, then quickly retracted her hand. The dragon didn't move. She relaxed a little and helped with the cleaning as well.

After the wounds on her neck were seen to, she lowered her head and rested it on the ground while the others tended to minor injuries on her body. Lavellan stepped in front of her and tapped her upper jaw. She opened her mouth. He stuck his head in, looking for the injury from Sera's explosive arrow.

"What, are you serious?" asked Sera.

"It's fine." He couldn't sense any hostility from her.

There was a bleeding section at the back of her throat.

"I think she can just do roar fire to cauterise it," said Lavellan. "Everyone, move back, momentarily."

They did. Lavellan communicated his intent. It wasn't unlike talking to Vergala or impressing his aura upon another. The dragon raised her head to the sky and roared out a column of fire in response. When she finished, she lowered her head and opened her maw again. Lavellan inspected it and nodded. She closed her mouth.

"She's different from other dragons we faced," said Bull. "She seems kind of... uh, calmer? When she's not killing us."

"Maybe she's got loyalty to this place," suggested Blackwall.

"Do dragons work like that?"

"We don't really know much about them, so maybe."

The dragon lightly snapped her jaw, made another rumbling sound, nudging at Lavellan with her snout. Except, her head was large, so it was like a wall pushing against him. He stumbled back. She opened her mouth again and ran her tongue over a tooth to the side.

Lavellan crouched by her mouth, beside the tooth. There was a crack at the base of it.

Oh. Maybe it was from when Blackwall had slammed into the side of her mouth.

It hurts? Lavellan asked.

She rumbled. He chewed on his lip in thought, glanced at Dorian, who was mending the wound on her leg.

"Dorian," he called and gestured for him to come closer.

"What is it?" asked Dorian and crouched beside him.

Lavellan gestured at the tooth. "Cracked. Will have to be removed since it's hurting her."

"Oh," he murmured. "Alright, but dentistry isn't quite my thing. Solas? Do you know how to remove teeth?"

"Not medically, if that's what you're asking," said Solas.

"How else do you remove teeth?" Blackwall asked.

"Blunt force."

Blackwall cackled. "Are you sure he's the right person to ask then, Inquisitor?"

"Good point," said Lavellan. "I'm going to ask the Well."

Dorian laughed in disbelief. "Would dentistry be a part of their knowledge?"

"You'll be surprised." He closed his eyes and communed with the Well, posed his strange question, and was unsurprised to find that there *was* dentistry knowledge in there. "Well! Guess I'm doing dental work on a dragon. I'm going to need Solas for this."

"Oh, come now," teased Dorian. "This old mage won't do?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, you're Circle-trained. The magic I need is more in line with Solas'."

“I suppose that makes sense.”

And so, he performed dental work on a dragon with Solas. How many people could say they’d done that?

The extraction took just under half an hour, but finally, the dragon was healed or on the way to recovery. She brushed her acknowledgement against him then flew off, their connection growing fainter, but still present.

“I can call her,” said Lavellan, the dragon’s tooth resting in his hands. “But only once.”

“Today was *weird*,” said Sera, scratching the back of her head. “Kind of feel shite for shooting her in the mouth now.”

The others lingered for a while longer, sitting as their mages healed them.

Bull was still staring at the sky even after the dragon was long gone.

“Bull?” asked Lavellan. “You good?”

He blinked, shook his head. “Yeah, uh. Yeah. Just... We made eye contact and I swear I thought she was trying to talk to me. I think I almost heard it.”

They stared at him.

“Hey, don’t look at me like I’m the weird one here,” said Bull. “I’m not the one who stuck his head inside her mouth.” He scrunched his face. “Oh, hold on, that doesn’t sound right.”

Blackwall groaned. “*No one* was thinking about that before you brought it up.”

They returned to the stream and set up camp near it.

The dusk had tinted the sky with orange, the water of the stream foiled with gold beneath that light, rippling invitingly. Maybe could bathe in it later. He *did* stick his torso into a dragon’s mouth and handled its tooth.

Speaking of, Lavellan knelt by the shore and washed off the blood on the dragon’s tooth. Dorian soon joined him.

“I asked Solas to do a little something,” said Lavellan. He showed Dorian the washed tooth and carefully prised it into two equal halves. Dorian’s eyes widened. “Asked him to cut it equally. I’d cleaned out the inside so it’s all ready to be turned into a necklace. I’m sure Dagna can think of something.”

Dorian accepted the tooth and smiled at him. “Thank you, Mahanon. I..” He stared down at the tooth. “Do you know what that oaf did? I had an amulet. Family amulet. Dull affair, the entire thing, but he noticed it was more significant than I was letting on.” He sighed. “Of course he did. For a man with only one working eye, he sure is sharp about these things.”

Lavellan chuckled. “Life of a spy.”

“Quite,” he huffed. “I’d sold the amulet to some Orlesian noble merchant. Bull bought it back at triple the price I’d sold it for, the fool.”

Lavellan blinked, trying to think back to last time. Had this happened...? He dug into the Well for his memories and no, this hadn’t happened before.

“It is the same with change. You cannot control the ripples; only their place of origin.”

He stared at Dorian, the tender fondness in his gaze, how gently he handled the tooth.

He then recalled Dorian’s wide-eyed, shattered look as he stabbed Bull with the blade of his staff. Recalled how Dorian hadn’t even allowed himself to cry until years later.

“Do you love him?” asked Lavellan.

“I’ve always hesitated with that word. Such a fickle thing, thrown about like pansies at a wedding.” His expression softened. “But... maybe. It may be the start of it. I am a little frightened, admittedly, but not as much as I’d expected. I really like him, and I think I may grow to love him.”

Lavellan looked back at the direction of camp, could hear his companions’ faint conversations.

“I hope it unfolds out well,” murmured Lavellan. “I hope you can be happy. Both of you.” This time.

“The same with you.” He smiled. “You seem happier. You and Solas.”

Lavellan returned his smile. “Come on, let’s get back to camp. Oh, do you need a cloth to hide the tooth?”

“No need, I brought my pack.” Dorian placed the tooth inside and they returned to camp.

There they found find Bull cackling, Sera giggling on her back, and Blackwall with his face in his hands — likely the target of their new joke. Solas was chuckling along. Bull leaned on Solas and laughed even harder, which made Solas hide his mouth behind the back of his hand as his bout of chuckling renewed and intensified, eyes closed from mirth.

Lavellan paused, staring at Solas.

How long had it been since he’d seen Solas with that expression? He wasn’t even shrugging off Bull’s arm.

Warmth unfurled in Lavellan’s chest and he smiled at the scene.

“At this rate, you’ll all scare off the wildlife,” said Dorian as he deposited his pack into his tent. “Mind sharing what’s got you all tearing your lungs out?”

“Nothing important,” said Blackwall. Sera’s laughs turned high-pitched.

Lavellan shook his head, still smiling, and prepared their dinner. Their laughter calmed some afterwards. Blackwall tried to help him with cooking, entire face still red.

“Had fun?” teased Lavellan, passing him the potatoes to peel.

“Maker, I want to rot in a ditch.”

“Elbows!” shrieked Sera.

“What’s she on about?” asked Dorian.

“You had to be here,” said Bull.

Solas chuckled and stood. “I am going to have a bath.”

“Oh yeah, ‘cause you stuck your fingers in dragon spit,” said Sera.

Bull sniffed himself. “Actually, might have one too in a bit.”

While Lavellan prepared the food, the others took turns bathing. It was dark by the time the food finished cooking, and they sat in a circle around the fire to eat. Lavellan settled beside Solas.

“Well done with the dragon,” said Solas.

“What, during the fight or after?”

“Both.” He paused, then huffed out a short laugh. “You were glowing while communing with the dragon.”

“Oh, yes. Well of Sorrows. Blue and all.”

“Blue? You were golden.”

Lavellan shot him a quizzical look. “Really?” He lowered his voice so the others wouldn’t hear.

“Maybe my magic bleeding in. I suppose we’re both living up to Varric’s nicknames for us today.”

“It suits you.”

“What, my nickname?”

“That. And the colour of your magic.”

Lavellan smiled. “You know, I was once considering masking the colour of my magic? I thought gold was too attention-grabbing, so I wanted to make it appear black. Just to blend in with the darkness because that’s usually when I conducted my missions. It would eat up a bit more mana, but I thought it would be more practical.”

“And did you?”

“No. Everyone that I suggested the idea to either scrunched their face or gave me a confused look. So I kept it.”

“I would be in agreement with them.” He tucked a strand of Lavellan’s hair behind his ear. “You looked breathtaking. And when you were airborne, it felt as if time had slowed for a moment. I could not tear my gaze away. I thought, *‘What I would give to be the air beneath his wings.’*”

Lavellan stared at him again, unable to find a suitable response.

Solas smiled. “I did become the air. Somewhat. My magic would have had to do. It also saved you from what was certain to be a painful collision with the dragon.”

“You can’t just— You can’t just say that. I—” He tried, and failed, to articulate *why* Solas should be banned from saying romantic shit like that with *that* voice. Solas’ smile grew.

Lavellan grumbled and just continued eating. Afterwards, he left for his turn to bathe in the stream.

He stripped at the banks and entered, shuddering at the initial chill of the wind and water submerging him up to his waist. It wasn't too much of a bother. Again, the Wilds were warmer than you'd expect them to be, and he'd long been used to cold dips in the night, recalling all the times that he and his friends had played in the streams late at night without the elders' permission.

It'd been worth it despite the pinched ears.

He washed himself and acclimated to the water, stared up at the first moon peering through the gap between the large trees' canopies.

How long had it taken before Corypheus had made his next attack? It was just soon after they'd returned from taming the dragon. Then again, Lavellan had shunted him to the middle of the desert this time, so that could have meddled with the timeline of events.

What a headache.

He spotted movement at the corner of his eye, followed by the sound of knocking wolves.

"You sure are fond of walking in on me taking a bath," said Lavellan. "What excuse do you have this time? You didn't know that I wasn't finished having a bath?"

Solas chuckled. "No. You forgot to take a towel."

"Sure, that's what it is." Lavellan grinned at him. There was indeed a towel draped over his arm. Lavellan held out his hand, water dripping from it and into the stream. "Won't you come join me instead? It's *terribly* chilly. Aren't you my personal heater?"

"Don't be spoiled." He draped the towel over the low branch where Lavellan had hung his clothes.

Lavellan made a hurt sound and retracted his arm. "Solas," he drawled, "you were always so eager to find an excuse to see me half-naked, and now here I am and you're turning away?"

"That was not what happened!"

He faced Solas fully, tilted his head. "Wasn't it? Asking me to strip during that time at Wicked Grace as punishment?"

"*You* challenged me. And the punishment was a collective idea from the others."

"Offering to give me a *massage*? In the baths?"

Solas paused.

"Did you enjoy it?" Lavellan asked, leisurely made his way back to the banks, enjoyed Solas' gaze following his every movement. "What did you do when you were back in the privacy of your room?"

He didn't respond.

"Oh my, that's damning." Lavellan pulled himself up, ignoring the goosebumps that rippled throughout his body from the cool air meeting his soaked skin.

Solas kept his gaze above the shoulders. Actually, the poor man looked frozen, all serious-looking.

"And what did *you* do?" Solas returned, voice commendably even.

Lavellan hummed and kept making his way towards Solas, grass pressing underfoot, water dripping down his legs. “Me? I tested something.”

“What did you test?” Not once did Solas’ gaze dip.

Lavellan wrapped his arms around Solas’ neck and pressed himself close, the jawbone necklace pressing into his ribs. Solas stared at him, transfixed, still frozen. Was he even breathing? But then, he blinked and looked at a distant spot over Lavellan’s shoulder, his lips pinching into a tight line.

Well, that wouldn’t do. Here Lavellan was, dripping and naked, and the damn wolf was looking elsewhere?

“Fen’Harel claimed he had ears in Skyhold’s walls.” He leaned in close and whispered in Solas’ ear, “I was wondering if he really would visit if I cried out his name at night.”

His breath hitched and his gaze flicked back towards Lavellan.

Lavellan sighed forlornly. “Alas, he didn’t respond. Even now, he’s being so cold.”

“You will have to pardon me for it. I am uncertain if the man I am talking to is my lover or a seductive creature come to spirit me away.”

He kissed behind Solas’ ear. “Would that be so bad? Didn’t you say I was your bad habit? Won’t you come indulge in this bad habit?”

Solas made a strangled noise at the back of his throat, grabbed the towel he’d draped over the branch, and pulled it over Lavellan’s head. Lavellan yelped and scrambled to pull it off his face.

“Go dry yourself before you get cold,” said Solas and walked away.

Lavellan pulled the towel off his head and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

I was stuck on this chapter for a while, so I'm sorry if it's a little eh. Anyway, Lavellan's growing list of bizarre things he's done can now include dragon dental.

By the way, heads up, next chapter has smut, but i'll still provide a skip button for those who'd rather not read that part of the chapter of course

[AND NEW ART OF THE TWO LAVELLANS](#) FROM CDRACONIK!! And two tapestry pieces that i wrote because i was procrastinating on my studies: [Solas POV part 3](#), [Dirth POV](#)

Also, I rewrote ch 1 again. Well, not rewrote but sort of merged the original and rewrite then made it coherent coz i realised i got so worried abt the chapter being long and not streamlined that i kind of... cut out the parts that made it my writing voice :/ so i went fuck it, i'll tell the story how i want to tell it. anyway, you'll see a lot of things from the original got restored.

***Catch a spill of sunlight**

Chapter Notes

*Chapter contains optional NSFW content.

I've provided a skip button before the NSFW scene starts which will take you to the end of that scene if you'd rather opt out :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a warm and golden feast

Lavellan returned to camp dressed and mostly dry and hung up his towel with everyone else's.

Everyone had already retreated to their tents, Sera and Blackwall playing cards in theirs, Dorian and Bull conversing in the other. Lavellan crawled into his and Solas' tent. A ball of mage light hovered in the corner and furs had already been laid on the ground, bedrolls unfurled into blankets rather than closed since they both preferred to hold the other close during sleep.

"Why'd you run away?" Lavellan teased and laced up the tent's flap.

"I did not."

"Yes, you did. Little wolf scurrying away with his ears and tail tucked in." He twisted a strand of his hair between his fingers. "Could you dry my hair, please?"

Solas shot him an unimpressed glance.

Lavellan clasped his hands and looked at him in pleading.

"You cannot keep getting what you want by giving me that look," said Solas.

"Oh, okay." He sat on Solas' crossed legs instead, shuffled and made himself comfortable. He patted Solas' knee. "There! Not giving you a look anymore. And look at that, easy access to my hair."

Solas sighed. Nevertheless, he ran his fingers through Lavellan's hair and summoned a gentle, heated wind. Lavellan closed his eyes and hummed in contentment, leaned back against him as the warmth and pleasant rake of his fingers soothed the tension that he hadn't realised had gathered in him.

The wind stopped once his hair was dry. Solas embraced him from behind and laid his head on Lavellan's shoulder, nuzzled against his neck.

"Thank you," said Lavellan, voice dipping into a sleepy murmur.

Solas hummed, pressed kisses up the side of his neck. Lavellan smiled and tilted his head to bare more of his skin.

"Why did you run?" Lavellan teased again.

He kissed the point where jaw met neck. "I was being polite."

"Maybe I wanted you to be impolite."

"I will keep that in mind for next time."

"Next time? Your chance has passed, good sir. Woe, I've been spurned."

Solas chuckled. "Don't be upset."

"I'm upset." Lavellan waved a hand and got off him, crawling beneath the blankets with his back to Solas. He settled beside Lavellan and the mage light vanished with a snap of his fingers, plunging them into darkness.

"I'll make it up to you," he said, embracing Lavellan from behind once again.

Lavellan closed his eyes with a small smile. "We'll see."

In between the exhaustion from the day and the relaxation from the stream and Solas having played with his hair, sleep wasn't difficult to fall into.

Lavellan dreamt that he was in the middle of a forest.

This... was not his dream.

The moon was large and intrusive, its light diffusing within the dark fog of the forest, but his immediate surroundings were being lit by a brighter glow, repelling the fog. He looked down at the source and found a starlit sword hanging from his hip.

"Well, what's this?" he asked, grinning. He stretched out a hand and tried to reshape the dream, but it resisted. The magic that had built it was stronger than his. Lavellan wandered the forest instead, kept a keen eye on his surroundings.

Something moved within the fog.

Lavellan stopped, still smiling. "Have you not learned your lesson from when I last bested you?"

"Bested me?" asked a voice as silvery as the moonlight. "I believe that was my victory, vun'lin."

"Don't you recall what made my traps so compelling? The illusion of victory, fen'lin. You fell for it, and you enjoyed every moment of it. I'm not sure if I can count that as your victory."

Another shifting movement. Lavellan turned his head towards the source.

Solas stepped out of the dark fog and into the boundary of the sword's illumination, had come as himself, no shadow of a wolf hiding his face, no illusions, no distortions to his voice. Lavellan's playful expression softened slightly, heart clenching and warming at the display of sincerity.

"If that is the case, then I propose a rematch," said Solas.

Lavellan crossed his arms, raising a brow. "Sore loser."

“Not so. The conditions were ambiguous, and thus, there were no clear victors. Let us make the game more defined.” He held a hand up to his chest. “As a show of good faith, you may set the rules of the game.”

“You are *so* generous.” Still, he paused in thought. “Are there any landmarks in this forest? A body of water or something striking. Anything?”

“There is a stream nearby.”

Perfect. Lavellan clasped his hands behind his back and paced in a circle around Solas. “The rules are simple. I run; you chase. No tricks, no manipulating the landscape. If I enter the water, I win. If you stop me, you win.” He stopped in front of Solas. “How about it?”

Solas smiled. “And what is your prize for winning?”

“My prize?” He feigned relief as he clutched his hands to his chest. “Why, I get to escape the Dread Wolf’s clutches, of course.”

Solas’ smile widened. “I see. Very well, I accept.”

“Aren’t you going to ask what your prize is?”

“As you said, the game is simple.” Solas stepped into Lavellan’s space. He was currently in his original form, so he had a couple of inches on Lavellan. “I am already pursuing my reward.”

His pulse quickened. “It’s not going to be that easy.”

“No tricks.” He rested his hand on the hilt of Lavellan’s sword and it vanished. The fog began to roll in. “You cannot outrun me. I will catch you.”

Lavellan dropped his gaze and grabbed the string of Solas’ jawbone necklace, twisted it between his fingers. “Careful, Pride. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“It’s a promise, is it?”

He smiled and covered Solas’ eyes with his hand, stood on his tiptoes and hovered his lips over Solas’, teasing but not quite touching. “Keep your eyes closed and count to fifteen,” he murmured. “Then come and catch me.”

Solas tried to close the distance. Lavellan moved away with a soft laugh and ran, dove into the dark fog of the forest.

He had to be careful. Very little light could spear through the fog and he’d rather not run into anything. He had to rely on his hearing rather than eyesight to determine the stream’s location as well, so he kept his ears peeled for the sounds of running water.

The seconds ticked in his mind. Dry leaves crunched underfoot.

He didn’t notice the descending incline ahead and skidded down, cursed as he made a rather loud racket and kicked up some of the underbrush. His heart pounded. He looked around him. Had it been fifteen seconds?

Lavellan pushed himself up and hastened his pace, veins alight.

Would the wolf catch him? He was almost tempted to let himself be caught, but the prouder part of him roared that thought into submission.

If he wants me, he can come get me.

He covered more distance, wove between the trees to complicate his trail.

“I see you,” Solas’ voice whispered from all around him.

“Like what you see?” he teased.

Solas didn’t respond. Lavellan laughed.

A movement to the side. Lavellan sharply changed course and managed to just avoid Solas reaching for him. How’d he get here so fast?

Lavellan grabbed a handful of leaves and twigs from the ground and threw it at his face, then sprinted away.

Solas grunted. “No tricks, you said.”

“That was no trick,” he called out over his shoulder. “That was quick thinking.”

“Is that so?”

A familiar rush filled his chest. Adrenaline coated him, his blood burning.

Lavellan scaled a tree and leaned against the trunk in wait, his breaths too loud in his ears. He listened for Solas’ footsteps.

Leaves crunched nearby. Closer, closer.

It stopped beneath his tree.

Lavellan held his breath. He’d climbed up too high so he couldn’t even see Solas’ silhouette.

Solas moved on, his footsteps fading.

Lavellan waited for a few more vigilant breaths before descending, took care to make minimal noise as he ran.

He couldn’t hear Solas nearby. Had he run too far in search?

The sounds of burbling water neared. There!

“[Avan ma enasalin, fen'lin](#)^[1],” Lavellan said, let his voice ring throughout the forest.

“[Avan sulrahn on'el, vun'lin](#)^[2],” came the response.

Big talk for somebody who was too far.

Beyond the trees and mist, he spotted the stream, the area surrounding it clear of the fog. Almost there! And no Solas anywhere. Victory was his.

He called upon his adrenaline for a burst of speed and broke out of the fog.

Almost—!

Solas leapt out of the fog, made a grab for him.

“Shit!” Lavellan dodged. When did he—

Solas caught him by the wrist and pulled. Lavellan dug his heels in.

“Now, now,” said Solas, smiling. “How is that fair? I’ve caught you.”

“I said you win if you stop me.” He twisted his wrist out of his grip and tried to run. Solas hooked his arm around Lavellan’s middle and Lavellan slipped, sent them both sprawling onto the ground. Oh no.

Solas sat on Lavellan’s hips and tried to capture his arms. Lavellan thrashed and struggled, blocking all of Solas’ attempts to put him in a hold.

“Hold still,” Solas hissed.

Lavellan laughed and bucked his hips to throw Solas off him. Didn’t work. He was too heavy in his original size.

He wrapped a leg around the back of Solas’ knee instead and pulled him off-balance, planted his other knee on Solas’ opposite hip and pushed. They rolled. Solas grabbed Lavellan by the collar and the back of his knees and rolled them over again. Lavellan’s back hit the ground and knocked his breath out.

His muscles were beginning to burn but Solas didn’t seem huffed at all. That couldn’t be right. Why was Lavellan getting tired if this was a dream? He’d never gotten tired while dreaming.

Solas was finally able to keep Lavellan’s legs in place. Lavellan kept resisting, twisted and slapped his arms around, until Solas caught his wrists and pinned them down.

Lavellan scowled and snarled. “What did you do?”

Solas leaned in with a sly smile, the weight of him pressing against Lavellan’s heaving chest. “This is the Fade, my love. I am far better acquainted with the realm of dreams and its laws.” His smile turned smug. “And I simply have better control.”

“Oh, fuck you. You must have cheated earlier. You were masking your footsteps.”

His eyes gleamed with delight. “Were you not warned by your elders that the Dread Wolf never plays fair?”

“I think they warned me not to play with you at all.”

“You should have listened. Now then, what shall I do with you?”

“Let me go?” he offered with a breathless laugh.

Solas stared at him

Then, he let Lavellan’s wrists go and sat back.

Lavellan frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Allowing you a chance at victory.”

“Found your streak of mercy?”

“Perhaps I enjoy watching you struggle.”

Lavellan was going to slap that smile off his face.

For a while, Lavellan did nothing but eye Solas, who really seemed to be giving him a chance. Lavellan pushed himself up onto his elbows. Nothing happened. Solas merely watched with that same, infuriating smile. He was no longer pinning Lavellan’s legs down either. Lavellan could slip out.

The stream bubbled. They stared at each other.

Lavellan moved without warning, quick as lightning—

Solas struck him on the shoulder.

And woke him up. Lavellan’s eyes snapped open to the darkness of the tent.

Solas’ arm was still wrapped around him from behind. Lavellan didn’t even get the chance to wake up fully before Solas moved and pushed him onto his back, straddling him.

“Shit,” Lavellan hissed and struggled, the blankets tangling around their legs. He squirmed blindly for a while until his eyes acclimated to the dark.

Solas caught both his wrists and pinned them over his head once again. He smiled and loomed over Lavellan, his eyes agleam with triumph, the jawbone necklace resting on Lavellan’s stomach.

“I win,” Solas whispered, pressing their bodies flush together. He wasn’t as heavy as he’d been in the dream, but it was still significant enough to lock Lavellan in place and end his resistance.

“Bested twice, vun’lin.”

Lavellan scowled, too proud to acknowledge how pleasant the weight of him felt.

“You’re a cheater,” he said, taking care to keep his voice low. Everyone’s tents may be spaced apart from each other by a couple of metres, but better safe than sorry. Otherwise, he’d never hear the end of it tomorrow.

“Perhaps, but you’re still right where I want you.”

“Is that so?” He smiled teasingly. “You’ve thought about this before, then?”

“Often,” he replied. Lavellan’s smile fell, caught off-guard by the admission. Solas kissed along Lavellan’s neck. “And extensively.”

Lavellan let out a shaky exhale. “You didn’t answer my question earlier. At the stream. What did you do in the privacy of your room after the baths?”

“I think you know.”

“What were you thinking of?”

Solas smiled against his neck. “Use your imagination.”

“I’d rather you show me.”

He paused, then raised his head, looking at Lavellan in consideration.

“That was an admission of defeat, my wolf,” said Lavellan. He smiled invitingly. “You win. Come and take me. I’m yours.”

His gaze dropped to Lavellan’s lips. “Are you certain? Here?”

“I don’t care where so long as you’re there.”

The heat in Solas’ gaze tempered into a gentler warmth and he leaned in. Lavellan’s breaths thickened with anticipation.

“For you,” Solas whispered against Lavellan’s lips, “the world.”

Solas kissed him. [\[skip\]](#)

Lavellan made a muffled sound and parted his lips, let Solas claim his victory, a familiar pressure of longing and missing rising in his chest. The kiss was merciless. Lavellan almost couldn’t keep up. This was like the kiss they’d shared after the baths, all hunger and heat and flashes of teeth. A kiss that made him feel both powerful and helpless.

He moved his hands to hold Solas closer, but Solas still had them in his grip. He tugged. Solas tightened his hold.

“I want to hold you,” Lavellan said, breathless.

That got him to let go. Lavellan pulled him down and kissed him again with renewed vigour, shuddered as Solas slipped a hand beneath Lavellan’s shirt and hitched the fabric up, revealed his skin to cool air. Solas’ curious hand roamed over Lavellan’s stomach and chest, mapped out every plane as if he wished to later paint Lavellan from memory of touch alone.

Solas brushed his thumb over a budding nipple and pressed his thigh against Lavellan’s growing arousal. Lavellan broke the kiss with a trembling gasp and rolled his hips. He was rewarded with Solas’ sharp breath and the scrape of his teeth against Lavellan’s neck.

Gods, it had been so long. He was shaking as if he’d never been touched before.

“Solas,” he called, a shadow of a whisper. “Solas.” He kept grinding against Solas, breaths stuttering. Solas pinched a nipple and met the roll of Lavellan’s hips with a harder press of his thigh. Lavellan’s hips jerked and his mouth fell open, a strangled sound escaping—

Solas pressed his hand over Lavellan’s mouth. “Careful,” he murmured against the column of Lavellan’s throat. “You’ll wake the others.”

Lavellan clawed at Solas’ back, fingers catching on the fabric of his tunic. Everything in him snapped tight with need.

“Please,” Lavellan pleaded into Solas’ hand, arched into the warmth of him. “Please.”

He removed his hand and cupped Lavellan’s cheek. “What do you need?”

“Just—” His face felt too hot. Could Solas feel it beneath his hand? “You. Please. Everything you can give.”

Everything before he leaves you again.

Solas kissed him. Lavellan buried that thought, tried to lose himself in the deeper urgency within every slide of their tongues. Lost himself in every breath they shared.

“Clothes off,” Solas ordered and let Lavellan sit up, helped him with his shirt, then unlaced some of the tent flap so the space wouldn’t steam up. Lavellan managed to remove his pants without bringing the tent down on their heads. Even if there was just enough room to manoeuvre in, they still had to be careful.

Solas finished unlacing the top part of the flap and turned, stared.

An unexpected surge of self-consciousness went through Lavellan.

He distracted himself by tugging on Solas’ tunic. “You too.”

Solas took the necklace off first and made to put it away. Lavellan stopped him and took it, wore it. The bone was cool against his heated skin.

Lavellan lay back on his elbows, tried to remain composed and controlled. Solas’ gaze sharpened. He’d always liked wearing Solas’ necklace during sex, enjoyed the look Solas would give him.

Solas undressed, far more graceful than what should have been possible in such cramped quarters. Lavellan raked his gaze down Solas’ form in appreciation, bit his lip at the proud line of Solas’ hard cock, remembered the weight and taste of it on his tongue, how it had filled him.

Bless elven eyesight for being able to see better in the dark.

Come to think of it, how had Lavellan even managed to fit Solas in before? Oh gods, could he even do it again?

“Is that why you named yourself Pride?” Lavellan asked, let out a small, nervous laugh.

Solas chuckled and knelt between Lavellan’s legs, pressed his hand against Lavellan’s chest and eased him back down. “Hush.”

The ground was hard, but the furs at least provided some cushioning. Solas grabbed the pillow that had been displaced from their earlier scuffle and placed it beneath Lavellan’s head. Fond warmth pooled in his chest. But that warmth slowly faded, replaced by the return of his self-consciousness and a curl of apprehension.

Here he was beneath Solas and his scrutiny, no armour, no walls, no lies. The barest Lavellan had been in such a long time, marred by scars both visible and not.

Solas placed his hands on Lavellan’s thighs. Those hands he’d used to love Lavellan, to hurt Lavellan. And yet, Solas seemed hesitant, as if he wasn’t certain if he was allowed this. Lavellan held himself still. If he didn’t, he’d begin trembling.

Maybe he wasn’t as bare as he’d first thought. There was still a layer between them, an uncertainty.

Solas trailed his hands up Lavellan’s thighs, his sides, slowly, reverently. It wasn’t the kind of touch that Lavellan had been expecting. He glanced at Solas in surprise. He’d expected something faster, more desperate, something Lavellan could throw himself into so that he could forget about everything else.

This was... too intimate. A slow peeling instead of a distraction.

Solas brushed his lips over Lavellan’s stomach, kissed any stray scars and marks as he worked his way up, resumed his earlier exploration with his hands. Lavellan did tremble this time.

Every kiss felt like molten heat, melting that final layer. Every attentive touch felt like it was sweeping aside the melted pieces.

Solas moved back and stared at Lavellan, captivated, a disbelieving breath escaping him.

“You’re beautiful,” Solas whispered.

Lavellan’s ears and face heated even further. An impatient ache built with his every breath until it was all he could think of.

Solas traced a finger over the underside of Lavellan’s cock, followed the curve of it as it arched over Lavellan’s stomach. Lavellan turned his head away, unable to weather the intensity of his gaze. He tried not to tremble again.

“What shall I do with you?” Solas asked once more, gripped Lavellan at the base and stroked lazily, swirled his thumb over the head of him and smeared the wetness that had gathered there.

Lavellan bit a knuckle to stifle a noise.

Solas tightened his grip and pumped Lavellan faster. He thrust into Solas’ hand. The heat from his skin began to feel like a second coat.

“Any suggestions?” Solas twisted his wrist on a stroke. Lavellan gripped the furs beneath, attempted to regather his thoughts.

He met Solas’ gaze again, a little out of breath. “I— hah...” He lost his train of thought. Solas smiled. Lavellan gritted his teeth and forced himself to take deeper breaths. “Take me. I want you to fuck me.”

Solas paused. Lavellan realised the problem.

“Ah,” said Lavellan. “We don’t have oil.”

“We do.” He reached behind Lavellan’s head and rummaged through their packs. Lavellan shot him a confused look.

“We do?”

“Bull gave it to me as a *gift* a few weeks prior,” Solas muttered.

Lavellan smiled to himself and made a mental note to get Bull a cask of Chasind Sack.

Solas settled between Lavellan’s legs once more, vial of oil now in hand. Lavellan’s earlier concern of being able to take Solas returned. He’d use his fingers sometimes when he had some time to himself, but he hadn’t taken anyone in so long.

He hadn’t wanted to.

Lavellan had known that no matter who he’d take to bed, he’d just end up looking for Solas.

“It’s been a while,” Lavellan admitted.

Solas looked at him but Lavellan averted his gaze. The truth behind the admission felt almost damning. Solas gently parted Lavellan’s legs, pressed a kiss to the crest of his hipbones.

“I will be careful,” he promised.

He poured oil generously over his fingers and slicked Lavellan's opening, circled his finger around it, pressing into but still not breaching.

"May I?" Solas whispered.

Lavellan met his gaze again, breathed in, out, and nodded.

Solas slipped his finger in. A slow slide. There was no pain or discomfort, but Lavellan still felt like he was on the way to ruination.

He found himself minding that less and less with each slow thrust.

Solas added a second finger. Lavellan felt the stretch then, focused on keeping his breaths even, brows scrunching slightly.

Solas pressed a reassuring kiss to Lavellan's lips. "You're doing well, ma vun'lin." He kept working Lavellan open with steady diligence, kissed along Lavellan's jaw and neck, down his chest. "Does it hurt?"

"No," he murmured, warmth unfurling in his chest at the praise.

His fingers brushed against Lavellan's prostate. Lavellan shuddered, breath catching, his cock leaking onto his stomach.

Solas struck at the same spot with his next thrust.

A jolt of pleasure shot through Lavellan's spine and his hips bucked, mouth falling open with a soundless cry. Solas didn't let up. Everything within Lavellan tightened and he gasped for breath with every hit, hands fisting into the furs beneath.

And Solas watched, attentive. He catalogued every reaction, every shift of muscle, every hitch of breath. Lavellan moved his hips and fucked himself on Solas' fingers, struggling to reel in the noises he wanted to make. It was unfair how easily Solas could unravel him.

"You look so lovely like this," Solas said, voice a low murmur. He rested his free hand on Lavellan's hip and gripped, nails biting into skin, mild stings. "I'm going to add a third. Can you stay relaxed for me, Mahanon?"

"Yes." Lavellan nodded fervently. "Yes."

Solas hummed in approval and Lavellan's laboured heartbeats fluttered.

He poured more of the oil over his fingers and pressed three into Lavellan. The stretch teetered into discomfort and Lavellan gritted his teeth, tensing.

Solas rubbed his thumb soothingly along the crest of Lavellan's hips. "Breathe, my love."

Lavellan let out a shaky breath, kept himself relaxed as Solas slipped his digits in fully.

"That's it," said Solas and twisted his fingers, pumped them in, out. Slow but deep. Lavellan's head spun. "Good boy."

A whimper accidentally left Lavellan. Solas glanced at him. Lavellan gnashed his teeth shut and turned his head away to escape Solas' scrutiny. His face was burning. Solas said nothing, only sped up his pace. Lavellan gripped the jawbone necklace to anchor himself, its edges digging into his palm, and scrunched his eyes shut.

A sure grip wrapped around Lavellan's aching cock, stroked once, twice, before wet heat enveloped it.

Lavellan's eyes snapped open and he clamped his hands over his mouth in time to muffle his cry. Solas glanced up at him, lips wrapped obscenely around his cock. He slid up and down in time with his fingers.

"Solas—" he gasped. Solas sucked hard and thrust his fingers. Lavellan forgot how to breathe. His stomach twisted with heat. "Fuck, fuck—"

The slight burn from the stretch soon morphed into pleasure and Lavellan drowned in the hot slide of Solas' mouth and tongue, the unerring precision of his fingers. Lavellan threw his head back, choking on a moan.

He wanted— He needed— Solas all to himself before the world could take him away.

"Please," Lavellan whispered feverishly. "Need you in me. Need to feel you. Please. Fuck me, please."

Solas made a low noise around Lavellan's cock.

"Solas," he begged.

Solas pulled his mouth and fingers away and Lavellan was left empty and burning and aching.

"Fenedhis," Solas hissed, hurriedly oiled his cock, and lined himself up. The head of him pressed against Lavellan's entrance. A breath passed. Solas grabbed the back of Lavellan's knees, pushed them to Lavellan's chest, and slid in.

They both let out a harsh breath.

Lavellan had been expecting it, but he'd still forgotten how thick Solas was. He trembled and gripped the jawbone necklace, the other hand clawing into the furs. He panted as if he was starved for air. Solas wasn't even completely inside yet Lavellan already felt full.

But Solas was moving so maddeningly slow.

"I'm fine," he gasped out. "It doesn't hurt. I can take you, please—" Everything. He needed everything while he could still have it.

Solas tightened his grip on Lavellan's thighs and slammed the rest of the way in.

Lavellan's back bowed and he clamped his hands over his mouth again, eyes wide, a relieved cry catching in his throat.

Holy shit—

Solas pulled Lavellan's hands away and kissed him, pried his lips open and fucked into his mouth. Lavellan wrapped his arms and legs around him, dizzy. Solas kept his hips still, letting Lavellan get used to him.

"Please move," Lavellan whispered into the kiss and rolled his hips. "Please, I can take it. I'm good, I've been good, I can take it."

Solas dipped his head and groaned into Lavellan's neck. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes, you've been good, Mahanon. My good boy."

Another burst of warmth in his chest. Lavellan held him closer and hid his face into the crook of Solas' neck, bit back another whimper. Yes, he was good. He was good and he was Solas' and Solas was his.

Solas started thrusting into Lavellan, slow, deep, left him trembling.

"Faster," Lavellan pleaded.

Solas went faster. Lavellan held on, clawed down Solas' back as each thrust knocked his breath out of his lungs.

Fuck, he'd missed this. Missed him. It had always been too easy to miss him and Lavellan had hated it.

Maybe he still hated it.

Solas stabbed at his prostate and his thoughts turned to white noise.

"There," Lavellan breathed. Solas drove into it again and again and Lavellan swallowed back a sob. He moved his hips in tandem, met Solas with every thrust.

His thoughts grew steadily out of focus, melting into a warm and golden pool. Nothing else mattered besides the two of them in this moment, joined and moving together.

Solas whispered in Elvish as he left a trail of bruising kisses over Lavellan's neck and shoulder, but Lavellan was too scattered to decipher them. He lifted his hips a little higher on the next thrust. The new angle whited out his vision and a gutted cry tore through his throat.

"Solas," he sobbed. Burning, he was burning.

Solas groaned low beside his ear and shifted slightly so he could thrust into Lavellan at that new angle, fucked him with wild, punishing bursts. He scratched at Solas' back. The air felt thick, clogging his lungs.

Full. He was so full and good and loved.

"I love you," Lavellan said deliriously, the words falling from his loose tongue. "I love you, I love you—"

Solas made a faint sound, like he'd choked on a breath. He reached down between them and took Lavellan in hand again, stroked as fast and hard as his pace. The last of Lavellan's coherence fell apart. He could hear soft, fevered cries, but he was in too much of a haze to determine their source.

The air felt as though it were snapping into his skin. Everything in him pulled even tighter.

And burst. The Anchor flared emerald and Lavellan came with a strangled moan, eyes wide yet unseeing. He shook and shook as waves of pleasure battered his body.

Solas held him through it. Solas fucked him through it.

Lavellan may have sobbed. Or stayed quiet. He didn't know.

By the time he returned to himself, the Anchor's light had already subsided. Lavellan lay there trembling, cried out softly as Solas kept thrusting. Solas kissed Lavellan's temple.

"Too much?" Solas asked.

Lavellan could only nod weakly, too wrung out for words.

He pulled out gently. Lavellan sucked in a breath at the loss. Solas gripped his own cock and stroked frantically, his breaths ragged. Lavellan slapped Solas' hand away and replaced it with his, still remembered how hard of a grip Solas preferred, and stroked the slick length of it, fast and unrelenting.

Solas tucked his face into Lavellan's shoulder again and thrust into Lavellan's hand, breaths hot against his neck.

"Mahanon," he groaned and bit Lavellan's shoulder as he came, spilled over Lavellan's hand and stomach. Lavellan kept stroking until Solas softened in his hand.

Solas lowered himself and lay on him. Lavellan wrapped his still trembling arms around Solas and closed his eyes, relished Solas' warmth and weight.

They stayed there and caught their breaths, sweat cooling. Lavellan's thoughts slowly returned, gaining shape, the various aches and stings on his body surfacing above the fading high along with the realisation that he'd failed to be quiet.

"Oh gods," Lavellan groaned. "I definitely woke them. There's no way I didn't."

Solas chuckled weakly, face still tucked into the crook of Lavellan's shoulder.

"Stop laughing, we're never going to hear the end of it now. From Sera in particular."

"I made sure they would be in a deep sleep. Nothing short of an earthquake can wake them tonight."

Lavellan paused. "But you told me to be quiet— Oh, you *ass*!"

Solas' shoulders shook from his faint laughter and he pushed himself up, smiling down at him. "I was curious to see how well you could stay quiet." His smile turned self-satisfied. "You almost made it."

"Unbelievable." He whacked Solas' arm and tried to wriggle away. "Off. Let's get cleaned up."

Solas laughed again but he got off. Lavellan grabbed a cloth from his pack and they wiped the other down. After, he tried to give the jawbone necklace back. Solas shook his head.

"Keep it on for now," he said.

Lavellan snorted and smiled, then opened the flap and poked his head out cautiously. It was quiet outside save for the sounds of the forest. He shuffled out, ignoring Solas' call to cover himself from the chill, and stood. Solas followed, carrying some of the furs they'd lain on with him. To be cleaned too, probably.

He grabbed Solas' wrists before Solas could cover himself up and hauled him along as he dashed to the stream, cackling.

"Mahanon, put something on—"

Lavellan didn't stop.

They reached the stream. Solas looked ridiculous with the furs folded in his arms.

“Clearly I did not try hard enough if you’re still able to move about like this,” said Solas.

Lavellan stretched. “Don’t worry, I’ll feel it tomorrow. Riding on horseback is going to be interesting.”

For now, he and Solas cleaned up themselves and their collateral damages, then Lavellan used Solas as a portable heater and dryer once again. They returned to their tent, fresh and warmed. Lavellan curled up beside Solas underneath their blankets and held him, safe and content, his exhaustion catching up to him.

Solas absentmindedly combed through Lavellan’s hair, soothing.

It would be nice if things could stay like this forever. But they wouldn’t. He knew that more than anyone.

Still, it would be nice.

“Hypothetically,” said Lavellan, “say you no longer had to worry about this business with the poison and the Veil. What would you do? What would you like to do?”

Solas hummed in thought. “Perhaps return to travelling. Thedas has changed much since the golden age of the elves. I would like to see for myself the famed dockside cities of Rivain, the cliffs of Antiva, the sprawl of the Anderfels. Collect and share stories, learn and teach.”

“A vagabond lifestyle?”

“Yes.” He paused. “Although, I am not opposed to the thought of settling. Perhaps after all my travels are over.”

“Where would you settle?”

“Somewhere peaceful, but still stimulating. Perhaps a place that can also serve as a point of rest for any weary travellers.”

Lavellan smiled. “That sounds wonderful.”

“I had not given this thought before,” Solas admitted. “My future has always been...” His voice softened. “Uncertain, yet certain.”

Yes, that sounded accurate.

Lavellan hoped that Solas could achieve that happiness and future one day.

His eyes slipped shut.

Lavellan woke up briefly when the tent was lightening from the approaching dawn.

The flap had been opened slightly again, allowing a view of the forest outside. Solas was already awake and sitting up, staring out into the forest with a troubled expression. He was holding the wooden wolves.

Lavellan pretended he'd seen nothing and sank back into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Woof.

Okay but in all seriousness, this took me SO LONG to write. Salute to smut writers. This was hard (pun intended), and practically uncharted territory for me haha.

By the way, [MORE ART FROM CD!](#) They drew the mural that Solas painted of Ras this time. It's beautiful thank you :'). Also, ClearAutumnVibes wrote another fanfic -- [a Little Mermaid AU!](#) Mwah. Good seafood.

(Hey, did you notice that for all the three hunts in their dreams that they've done, solas' appearance became less and less wolfish with each hunt? the first hunt, he was a wolf, in the second, he was fen'harel, third he's just solas. (:)

Translation

[1] **Avan ma enasalin, fen'lin:** I can taste my victory, little wolf.^[1]

[2] **Avan sulrahn on'el, vun'lin:** I can taste something better, little sun.^[1]

Greetings and farewells

Chapter Notes

Mental health and mood has been absolutely horrid for the past month lads, so my apologies, i wasn't able to look over this too thoroughly 🙏 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

the comings and goings

When Lavellan awoke again, it was to the morning light slipping past the partially opened tent flap, painting a strip of creamy gold over them. Lavellan blinked blearily. His head was on Solas' chest, rising and falling with his every slow breath, his arm wrapped loosely around Lavellan, his hand a steady weight on Lavellan's head.

Lavellan angled his head up and looked at him. Still asleep. The creamy strip of sunlight had fallen over one closed eye, dusting the sweep of his lashes. Lavellan brushed his fingers against Solas' cheek, swiped his thumb beneath those sun-dusted lashes.

Solas' eyelids fluttered, and his eyes opened. He blinked, then looked at Lavellan and smiled.

"Morning," Lavellan whispered, hand resting on Solas' cheek.

He grasped that hand and kissed his palm. "Good morning. How do you feel?"

"Sore and fantastic."

Solas laughed softly. "Do you wish to continue sleeping? It's still quite early."

"No, it's alright. I just need to commune with the Well."

"I will be here."

Lavellan smiled and closed his eyes again, tuning into the Well. As promised, Solas was still there when he finished. Lavellan yawned then sat up slowly, stretched, the jawbone necklace swaying and bumping against his bare stomach.

"Ah," said Lavellan and tried to give it back again.

Solas shook his head. "Humour me for a while longer."

Lavellan kept it on and grinned. "What, you liked that I wore it that much?"

Solas hummed, appraising him. Lavellan snorted and got dressed, slipped into a shirt. A high-collared one. Lavellan couldn't see them, but with how much Solas had bitten last night, there was no chance that he hadn't left marks.

"Are you a mosquito by any chance?" Lavellan grumbled and dug into his bag. "Did I bring a scarf...?"

“A scarf in the Wilds?” Solas teased. “That would certainly announce that you have something to hide.”

Lavellan gave him an unimpressed look and snapped his collar up higher. “I should’ve chosen my companions for this trip better. Better yet, I shouldn’t have brought you. You just make me misbehave.”

Solas tilted his head, smile growing. “And yet, you were such a good boy last night—”

Lavellan threw a pillow at his face.

Once everyone was awake and they had food, they packed up and readied their horses. Lavellan slipped his coat on, checked his inner pockets, and relaxed when he felt the earring and stone. He draped his cloak over himself.

Bull stretched after loading the last of their supplies onto the horses.

“Don’t think I’ve slept that good in a while,” said Bull. “Slept like the dead.”

Lavellan pulled his hood up and looked away.

“Had a dream about cheese,” said Sera.

“Nobody asked,” said Blackwall.

Everyone got on their horses. Lavellan stared at his, lips pursing. Solas pulled himself up on his horse and smiled down at him.

“Is something the matter?” Solas asked sweetly.

Lavellan steeled himself and hauled himself up, lips pinching when he settled on the saddle. “I hate it when actions have consequences.”

Solas laughed and off they went.

Lavellan rode in slight discomfort the entire time.

When they stepped out of the eluvian into Skyhold, Lavellan was ready to lie down and never get up. Dorian rushed to Dagna, Sera rushed to get her favourite food from the tavern and hauled Blackwall along, while Bull threw them a casual farewell and left.

Lavellan shot Solas a sour look. “You were smirking at me the entire time while we were riding.”

“I was doing no such thing.”

Lavellan shoved the supplies into Solas’ chest petulantly.

“Make yourself useful and get these back to the requisition officers,” said Lavellan.

“Won’t you say please?”

“Goodbye, Solas.”

He laughed softly. “I will see you later, vhenan. I can continue teaching you how to use a staff.”

“Sure, just never say I can’t operate yours ever again. Clearly, I can.”

“You are terrible,” he said and walked away. Lavellan laughed at his retreating back.

When Lavellan stepped out of the eluvian room, he spotted Bull by the well in the garden. Waiting, it looked like. He waved Lavellan over. Oh?

“Hey Mercy,” he greeted once Lavellan was close enough. “Just wanted to say thanks for inviting me. Fighting then helping that dragon was one of the best things to have ever happened to me.”

Lavellan smiled. “Had a feeling you’d enjoy it.”

“Ha! I sure did. Also, give me your hand.”

“Oh. Okay?” He held out his hand and Bull turned it so that it was palm up, then placed something in it, closed Lavellan’s fingers around the hard item. Lavellan frowned at it. *It* being a small, round container.

“It’s a salve,” explained Bull. “For any *damages* during some fun roughhousing.”

Lavellan’s face exploded with heat. “What—”

“Also, run a warm bath and soak in it for a while. Really helps with the soreness.”

“Oh Creators.” He rubbed a hand down his face. Nonetheless, he muttered, “Thanks for the oil.”

Bull guffawed and patted his shoulder again. “You’re welcome!”

“How did you...?”

“Solas looked more smug than usual. Also, I know the walk of someone trying to hide that they got a little carried away.”

“Thanks, I’m going to crawl into a ditch now.”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” He slung his arm around Lavellan. “We’re all friends here.”

“There are Chantry sisters nearby,” he hissed.

“Well, shit, better go tell them you got blessed—”

Lavellan stomped on his foot.

Despite Bull being an idiot, Lavellan still arranged to have two casks of Chasind Sack sent to him and the Chargers. After, he informed his advisors of his return (and finally had a reason to wear a scarf to hide the fact that his lover had probably been a mosquito in his past life) and arranged to have a War Council tomorrow afternoon since Josephine had several meetings to hold today.

There was something familiar about this situation...

His suspicions were proven correct after a quick look at the date and after consulting his memories in the Well.

Tomorrow would be the day that Corypheus would attack at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

“Are you alright?” asked Leliana and he snapped out of his thoughts, registering his surroundings once again, the messenger ravens cawing in their cages, echoing in the rotunda.

“Sorry, what?” he asked.

“I was asking if you’d like to take these treats to Vergala.” She offered a small bag. “It’s quite popular with our ravens. Perhaps she’ll enjoy them.”

“Oh, yes.” He accepted it. “Thank you.”

Leliana stared at him. “Is something troubling you?”

“Corypheus, I suppose,” he admitted. “It’s suspicious when children who are renowned for throwing tantrums suddenly go quiet. Your agents really heard nothing?”

“None. The scouts have risked going into the desert to confirm, but they have not seen any signs of him either. They stumbled across a few nomadic groups, and they have not seen anyone else in the desert either.”

Damn. Lavellan shook his head. “We’ll just keep asking around then. But what about you? How are you?”

Leliana sat on the edge of her desk, glancing at the shrine in her alcove.

“I’ve given it some thought,” she said. “About the possibility of becoming Divine.”

He sat with her. “And?”

“I think... I can do some good.” She bowed her head in thought. “The Chantry requires change. I think I can be the vessel for it.”

Lavellan stared at her. She looked at him.

“Do you think I can be the vessel for it?” she asked.

There was resolution in her eyes, but it wasn’t the chilly steel that he’d seen in Divine Victoria’s eyes. This was a stubborn flame refusing to be snuffed. Even so, Leliana had faced strong voices of opposition during her reign, ones she’d swiftly silenced, but they’d still been present.

“Change is loud,” he said. “Difficult. You will have days where you will feel like giving up. Even Andraste had her darker days. Likely.”

She nodded.

“How will you achieve this change?” he asked.

“By staying true to myself. I am aware that many will be unhappy with how I wish to reshape the Chantry, but I will meet their objections with my resolution. They will not shake me.”

“Would you kill to bring about your change?”

They stared at each other in a long silence.

“It would be foolish of me to think that it will never be necessary,” said Leliana. “The hearts of people can be cruel and ruthless. But it will not be my first resort. If there are better methods, I will pursue them.”

Lavellan considered the answer, the sincerity beneath it.

Then, he smiled. “I’ve always thought that you could be a vessel for change, Leliana. It was just a question of what kind of vessel you would be.”

She smiled back. “Am I to take that as approval?”

“You don’t need my approval.”

“Your support, then.”

“Political or emotional?”

She chuckled. “I would not be opposed to both.”

“I like you, so you can have both.”

“Most generous of you!”

Lavellan still prepared despite Corypheus' silence. He made sure his weapons and armour were in good condition, stacked up on his flasks, subtly made certain that his companions were hale and prepared, and kept an eye on the skies.

But even his fretting and pacing couldn’t last for most of the day, and he was left in the afternoon with nothing to do. Lavellan returned to his quarters to attend to paperwork instead. but seeing the stack of dry reading put him off it, and his gaze fell on his shrunken staff strapped to his pack. Nobody had questioned it. Lavellan had just said, “Cool stick. I liked it,” and they’d shrugged it off.

His companions were getting too used to his eccentricities. He should figure out a way to make them lose their minds again.

Lavellan smiled as he retrieved the staff and lengthened it. Magic hummed within. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the room and practiced his barriers again, though he was tempted to lob fireballs at the fireplace. But he could already imagine the chiding look Solas would give him, so he refrained.

Once he exhausted most of his mana, Lavellan put the staff aside, chewing at his lip in frustration, missing his old power. Had he been able to shapeshift again, then he could have taken himself out for a fly to get rid of all this anxious energy.

Maybe he could ask Morrigan about how to shapeshift...

At the thought of Morrigan, his mind returned to the Well of Sorrows.

She *was* right about one thing, and it was that he was carrying so much forgotten history and knowledge. If he was lost, then those would go with him.

Lavellan stared out the balcony doors in silence, then at the ice rose on the fireplace mantle.

He sat at his desk and pulled up a blank sheet of paper, took out his quill and dipped it into the inkwell. He brought it over the paper, paused.

Where should he start?

Arlathan flashed in his mind's eye.

He wrote.

Arlathan hovered in the sky, comprised of a central island and several vestigial islands connected by bridges of crystal and twining branches and eluvians...

He wrote until the light dimmed, so he lit the candles in the room and wrote some more.

"You are writing so fiercely," said Solas and Lavellan's head snapped up. He hadn't even noticed him enter. Solas lit the fireplace with a wave of his hand and placed a plate of food on his desk. "You were missed at dinner."

"Oh." He put the quill down and sat back, stretched his neck. "I lost track of time."

Solas studied the pages of writing Lavellan had done. "Arlathan?"

"Talked about the wards as well, renewed every five hundred years during Quincentennials. Also the different districts."

Solas' voice was soft when he asked, "And the slums?"

"It's there." He stared at the candle's flame. "I want this information to go to the Dalish."

Solas fell silent. He nudged the plate closer. "Eat."

Lavellan ate while Solas read what he'd written. After Lavellan finished, he leaned back in his seat.

"Corypheus will strike tomorrow," said Lavellan. Solas glanced at him. "At least, that's when he did last time. He opened another breach above the Temple of Sacred Ashes. I was considering sending scouts there, but that may just endanger them."

"Was that why you were restlessly fluttering about Skyhold today?"

"I'm just... preparing."

"We have bested Corypheus numerous times. His hubris blinds him. No matter what happens tomorrow, we will emerge victorious."

But that wasn't what Lavellan was truly afraid of.

Solas might leave tomorrow.

Would he? So much had changed but...

He looked at Solas.

And once we emerge victorious? he wanted to ask. *What will you do then? What will happen to us?*

"I told you what happens," Lavellan murmured. "After we beat Corypheus."

"The orb broke."

"What if I save it? What, then?"

The silence was turbulent, this time. Solas couldn't meet Lavellan's eyes, and that was all the answer Lavellan needed.

Solas was still undecided.

What would Lavellan do if Solas decided to go? Could he ask Solas to stay?

He was tired of asking him to stay.

The door to his quarters slammed open and Lavellan and Solas jumped, startled out of their reveries.

"Hanon!" cried Ellana, rushing up the stairs and into the room. "Hanon!"

"I'm here, I'm here," he said and stood. "What's going—"

There was a book-sized box cradled in her arms. His eyes widened. Was that...?

"The Keeper's book," said Ellana.

Lavellan cleared the items on his desk and ushered her over. "Bring it here!"

They gathered around the table and she placed the box down, lacquered ironbark from the looks of it. There was a lock on the clasp. Ellana produced a key from her pocket and unlocked it. Within the box rested a book bound in halla leather, the cover carved with leaf-like designs at the borders and a stylised raven in the centre. Lavellan's breath caught.

That raven was the El'amelan's crest.

Lavellan took the book out carefully and placed it on the table, opened it with shaky fingers. Someone had folded back the leather halfway into the inner cover to make a pocket. Three folded pieces of paper had been slipped into it. Lavellan took one out. Written on it was the character for Asunara's name. The next paper had Faronel's name.

The last had Lavellan's name.

He slipped the other two papers back into the pocket, took a deep breath, and unfolded the one with his name.

It was a letter filled with scribbles.

"What?" asked Ellana.

Lavellan's eyes widened in recognition. This was a technique that the El'amelan had employed with their correspondences.

"Wait," he said and hovered his hand over the letter, let some of his magic coat the paper. The scribbles glowed, recognising his magic, then rearranged themselves into Elvish characters, the handwriting familiar.

Bel'vedir's hand.

Dear Lavellan,

Hello. I'm sorry, this is still quite new to me. Usually, we can just imbue our emotions into the words if we want, but the world is different now. So little space, so much to say.

This letter will reach your hands, I've seen it. The clan that bears your name will be proud and strong and kind, I've seen it too. But I can't see you. I never could see you. Before, too much shadow. Now, too much light.

I have so much I want to say. We mourned you. Terribly. The fortress was cold. We gathered at the painting that Solas had done of you but said nothing. It felt like talking or saying rites wasn't appropriate. We all stood there, each of us, sharing what couldn't be said through auras. And then, we went our separate ways. Some disappeared and I never heard from them again. Some were full of vengeance, but they never acted on it out of respect for your final wish.

It made me mad, you know? Your final wish for us? I didn't want to look after a world that had abandoned you. A world that had abandoned us. That was the whole reason why we were in the El'amelan in the first place.

And yet, here I am, dying because I helped the elves fight for the Dales. Maybe because the elves of now feel as if the world has abandoned them too. Kindred spirits and all.

I'm not a fighter — although, your training certainly helped me stay alive for a lot longer than I should have — but I still fought. Killed people. I hated it. I hated you for a while during it. You said I would never have to kill again. But that's unfair of me to pin that on you. You never said we had to kill to protect.

I probably shouldn't be complaining to you in this letter but ah, my friend, you always did say I needed to complain more.

We lost the Dales, but the elves are so persevering and kind. I'm severely injured and dying, but a group of them still took me in even if resources are scarce and they can't afford to lug me around everywhere. They have heart and strength. They're beginning to call themselves a clan, and they listen to me with such rapt attention whenever I tell stories about Elvhenan. I see some of them frantically writing it down. It reminded me of my original objectives.

As you may or may not be aware, I entered uthenera and was planning to wake at an appropriate period where I would be useful. I thought it would align with your return. Maybe to help guide you as you have guided me, or to spread stories of you. I thought I'd woken up too early, but no. This is right. I wish I could be around for your return, but I cannot be. My role is to pave the way for you.

So, I told them your tale. Myth and truth alike. Their leader, Enarin, wrote everything down and compiled it into a book. I told her to guard this book with her life. It's the only surviving remnant of you.

The rest of the clan was so touched by your story that they decided to name themselves after you. I cried. Very ugly cry. You would've laughed.

The years will pass. One day, this book will fall into your hands. When you receive it, the choice of whether you wish to keep your story a secret or not falls to you.

Ah, this letter has gotten long.

I don't want to stop writing. It's too much like saying goodbye for real. I'm sorry. I'll be the one leaving, this time.

Thank you for everything.

*With eternal love,
Bel'vedir*

An addendum: I'm a little in love with Enarin but I'm dying. That is so laughably pathetic, I can't even get angry about it. I'll amaze her with some poetry instead. I'd take a leaf out of your book and start declaring my undying devotion and loyalty since it seemed to work out so well for you last time, but that's too intense, no offence. Glad it worked (I have no idea how. Perhaps because Lord Dirthamen is just as mad as you), but I think a bouquet of wildflowers will suffice for now.

Lavellan gave a wet laugh at the addendum, wiping away the stray tears that had fallen while reading the letter.

"From Bel'vedir," said Lavellan. "They were the first member of the El'amelan. Our scryer and my second-in-command. They woke up in time to aid the elves during the Exalted March, so that means they must have been one of the Emerald Knights, but..." He shook his head. "They were dying from their injuries by the time they wrote this letter."

"I'm sorry, Hanon," said Ellana.

He folded the letter carefully and placed it back into the pocket. If Vedir had been an Emerald Knight, then they were likely interred at Din'an Hanin. Maybe he could come back to the Emerald Graves to find their tree and pay his respects at their tomb.

"The book contains stories of me," said Lavellan. "Truth and myths alike."

The first page contained the title. Written in Common, this time.

Tales of the Ras'verelan: the Myths.

Indeed, the following pages had stories that the People had told of the Ras'verelan and Isha'belsal'in. Some were even accompanied by illustrations. Most were ominous, drawings of a figure half-cast in shadow with his cloak of raven fingers and dark mask. Ellana laughed softly beside him.

"Beware the Isha'belsal'in," she read aloud. "He will steal your face if you misbehave."

He smiled and kept flipping through the stories, pausing every now and again to admire the

occasional illustrations, until they reached a blank page denoting the start of a new section. Well, blank save for the line in the middle of the page.

The Truth, it read.

Oh, he'd had enough of that, thank you. Lavellan closed the book then and stared at the cover, tracing the El'amelan's emblem, his heart aching.

"Not going to look at it?" asked Ellana.

"I've lived it," he said with a small laugh. "I'm good. Do you want to read it? It was going to fall into your hands eventually anyway."

She smiled. "Always on board with reading spooky stories about my brother's past life."

Lavellan gently put it back in the box, paused, then took out Abelas' letter from the pocket. He handed it to Ellana.

"Can you give this to Abelas?" he asked. "I'd give it myself but I'm a little tired. I kind of... just want to rest."

Her gaze softened and she nodded. She locked the box again and took it with her as she left, throwing a soft goodnight over her shoulder. Once the door clicked shut, Lavellan let his false composure fall and leaned against his desk. Solas wrapped his arm around him, steadying him.

"Are you alright?" Solas asked.

Lavellan stared at the ice rose, an ache pulsing dully in his chest. "I miss them. They were my family." He rubbed a hand down his face. "Could I ask you for a favour?"

"Of course."

He gave Solas a tired smile. "Could you please run a bath for me? Just the bathroom here. No need to go to the bathhouse."

Solas kissed his forehead and disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of rushing water followed. Lavellan sat on his bed and leaned his elbows against his thighs, head bowed, shedding a few, quiet tears for the family he'd never gotten to say farewell to.

His chest clamped tight. He reached into his pockets and took out the earring and stone, gripped one in each hand.

The past and the present in each hand.

So then, what of the future?

The sound of running water stopped sometime later and Solas returned. He sat beside Lavellan and placed his hand on Lavellan's thigh, squeezed gently.

"Come," said Solas. "It is ready."

Lavellan rose his head. Solas wiped his tears with the end of his sleeves.

"I cry a lot," mumbled Lavellan.

"Your heart loves much and grieves even more."

Lavellan eased his grip on the stone and earring, and placed them on the bedside table. Solas looked at the earring with curiosity.

“Dirthamen’s gift,” said Lavellan, wiping some of his snot away and pulling a face at the wet patch on his sleeve. “The one I used to lead him to the scroll. He said he bought it because the metal reminded him of my eyes.”

Solas’ gaze softened. “That does sound like him.”

They walked to the bathroom, the tub was already filled with water. Solas helped him out of his clothes, brushed his fingers over the marks still on Lavellan’s neck and shoulders.

“You should have been called the Dread Mosquito,” Lavellan muttered.

He chuckled. “I hear Bull gave you a salve.”

“He did. For, and I quote, *damages during some fun roughhousing*,” he repeated, mimicked Bull’s tenor and pitch.

“That was a decent impersonation.” He tipped his head towards the tub. “Now, go on. While it’s still warm.”

Lavellan considered the tub and its size, then looked back at Solas. “One last request? Sit with me? In the bath. Just... exist with me, for a while.”

“Of course,” he said, briefly pressed their foreheads together, then undressed. They entered the tub after. Lavellan relaxed back against Solas, shifted slightly lower so that his head could rest against Solas’ chest while Solas wrapped his arms around Lavellan. The warmth from both Solas and the water seeped into Lavellan’s tense muscles and unwound them. He let out a small sigh of relief.

It was quiet. Lavellan lay his arms over Solas’, their hands resting together.

This was it. The calm before the storm.

He no longer knew what to expect tomorrow. He no longer knew what kind of ripples he’d created. It could go the same as last time, or it could go differently. At least, he now knew that he could wrest control of the orb from Corypheus using the Anchor. He had to focus on that. And then *not* drop the orb this time.

Then... what? Would Solas leave? A hopeful part of him whispered that it was different this time. That Solas would stay this time.

Another part said that he’d better prepare for the worst. Prepare for the heartache. Prepare for the pain. If he was expecting it, then it would hurt less.

If he still leaves even after everything you’d told him, then wouldn’t that shatter you more?

He was sick of preparing.

It doesn’t matter. None of this does.

Oh, but it did. It mattered too much.

What would Solas choose, this time?

Lavellan closed his eyes.

“Won’t you stay?” Lavellan selfishly whispered beneath his breath, but he was certain Solas still heard it.

Solas said nothing.

Lavellan pretended he’d never said anything and sank further into the water.

Chapter End Notes

I did some art for the fic again! [Sad Elf Sandwich triptych](#) this time and it's HEAPED with symbolism because I got excited. It's been-- a year since I last did art hhaa. You know, most people would've warmed up, but I was like "let's jump into a big project like RIGHT NOW" a;khdsjfas

Random thought but the conditions for the maker's return was for everyone to be singing the chant of light... did the chantry ever think that MAYBE the reason the maker set up such a high standard condition is because... he didn't wanna come back? did they ever think about that??? that it's like telling your child "i'll let you have this when you're older" with ZERO plans of actually doing it because you hope they'd forget about it as the years go by??? coz im getting that vibe. maker's totally booked it out of there like a dad getting milk at the store

Ominous quiet

Chapter Notes

So Thedas has two moons. I totally knew and remembered that. Def did not press ctrl+f to find all instances of me mentioning the moon and subtly tweaking them to mention that there are two moons in the sky. Not me, wouldn't do that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

waiting

Lavellan searched for Asunara in his dreams again, but he still couldn't find her or her realm. He stared at the Fade's shifting skies in worry.

He woke up earlier than he'd have liked, the room still dark and Solas still asleep beside him. Lavellan stared at the ceiling for a long time, his heart fluttering with unrest. He distracted himself by communing with the Well. The room was a little lighter when he next opened his eyes.

The War Council would be held in the afternoon.

Lavellan glanced at Solas, then sat up slowly, his hair falling over his shoulders. He rubbed his face.

He had to prepare.

Lavellan rose from bed, gaze falling on the nightstand where the jawbone necklace rested with the earring and stone. The three wolves were also there. Lavellan tilted his head. When did those get there?

He shook his head and made his way to his table, lit a candle, and wrote more information from the Well. Halfway through, he stopped writing to watch the sunrise.

What a peaceful morning.

Would the end of this day be as peaceful?

Solas stirred, turned to his side, then stilled again. The brilliant colours of the stained glass of the balcony doors painted the floor, stretching to the bed and over Solas, bathing him with red and emerald light. Lavellan stared at him, committed this scene to memory.

Wordlessly, Lavellan finished his writing and stood, dressed himself, placed the stone and earring back into his inner pockets, and made to leave.

He paused at the top of the stairs, looked at Solas again, then at the forest mural on the upper ledge.

Something tight wrapped around his heart.

Lavellan left.

He searched for some of his companions. Whoever would be awake at this hour.

Cassandra was reading in the corner of the training yard and he stopped walking, gauged his reaction, then silently joined her on the bench after he confirmed that being near her wouldn't be distressing. She looked up from her book, angling the pages away from him slightly.

"Good morning, Inquisitor," said Cassandra.

He smiled at her. "Good morning. Varric's book?"

She chuckled. "Not this time."

"Oh? Branching out?"

"That dwarf recommended a few books." She closed the book. The cover wasn't as tacky as Swords and Shields'. This one was quite classy, actually, with flowers and vines at the edges and two silhouettes at the centre. "Do not tell him I said this, but his recommendations were... acceptable."

He lowered his head so that his scarf would cover his mouth and muffle his soft laughter.

"Your secret's safe with me," he promised. "I'm a very good secret keeper."

"Yes," she said dryly. "It is why Varric has discovered that I read his books."

"That was a special occasion." He paused, his expression growing sombre. "Speaking of secrets... That method on reversing the Rite of Tranquility..."

She looked at him. "What about it?"

"Do you know the details?"

"I believe a spirit must touch the Tranquil's mind."

"Touch? What kind of touch?"

She shook her head. "It was not clear. Why do you ask?"

Lavellan looked down at the ground. "I have an old friend. He's a Dreamer. I recently found out that he became Tranquil after he was severely injured while Dreaming and... It was— It was an unfair circumstance. But I recalled you said there was a way to reverse it."

"I see." Her gaze softened. "He's a good friend of yours?"

"He is. I regret that I didn't make that known to him sooner."

Cassandra put a firm hand on his shoulder. "We will find a way to proceed. We will help your friend."

He stared at her, at the resolution shining in her eyes. The same resolution that had shone during their final battle, during the Exalted Council, during his darker days.

“Thank you, Cassandra,” he said, poured everything he could into it. He placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed it. “For your loyalty and faith in me, and for keeping me on the right path. However this ends, know that I could not have done any of it without you.”

She opened her mouth, but he stood before she could respond and he smiled at her, then walked away.

He found Abelas in the garden, sitting on a bench tucked away in the corner. Lavellan sat beside him and watched the garden and those within it, watched the Sisters meditating and the few Inquisition scouts sitting with a warm cup of coffee or tea in their hands.

“I received Bel’vedir’s letter,” said Abelas.

Lavellan nodded gravely. “Are you alright?”

He crossed his arms and looked down. “It... There is...” His lips pressed into a tight line. “There is much to consider.”

Abelas didn’t elaborate and Lavellan didn’t press.

Birdsong whistled in the air, the asters cheery as they swayed with the breeze. He stared at the well, recalled back to Elvhenan when he’d hid in it and later popped out to startle Solas, and smiled. So many memories in this garden.

“I have been meaning to apologise,” said Abelas. “For the way I treated you the first time we met.”

“Are you apologising because I’m Ras or because you realised it’s not a pleasant thing to say?”

“The former, initially. But the latter requires an apology, too.” His head bowed further, the side of his hood obscuring his face from Lavellan’s view. “And I apologise for being unable to love these elves the same way I have loved the People. Vedir is a far nobler person than I for being able to protect them and fight for them.”

Lavellan’s terse expression eased slightly. “Abelas, I’m not asking you to love them the same way as the People. That’s not possible. As connected as we are, we are still not the same. Different experiences have shaped us.” He leaned back against the bench. “I’m not forcing you to love the modern elves either. All I ask is that you respect them. Respect us.”

“The elves of now remind me of our failures.” He frowned at Lavellan. “They do not know what they’ve lost.”

“We know,” murmured Lavellan. “Do you think the Dalish chose to be nomadic? That the city elves chose to be sequestered into alienages or slums? No. Our way of life now is a constant reminder of what we’d lost.” He looked skywards. “But we make do. You accompanied us for missions, do you recall the slums in every major city we’d visit? The slaves toiling beneath the summer sun as they built another useless monument for the gods? They didn’t choose that life either.”

Abelas averted his gaze, quiet.

"I know it is painful," Lavellan continued. "You've lost your home too. Your friends and family and way of life and even your higher senses of awareness. But the elves of now aren't your mistakes reflected back at you."

He said nothing. Lavellan let him have his silence. Abelas had always needed time to himself before arriving at a decision.

"He was haunted by you," said Abelas.

Lavellan blinked. "Sorry?"

"Fen'Harel. When the red lyrium was poisoning his mind. He was haunted by you."

"I couldn't exactly haunt him since I was still alive."

"You needn't be dead to haunt someone."

Lavellan recalled the ghosts of Solas' touch and presence and quieted in agreement.

"He would be alone in a room hours after a meeting had concluded," said Abelas. "And he would whisper to himself. Begging someone to leave him be. Occasionally, he became violent, but most times, he sounded defeated."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I thought it was something you needed to know. He did care for you, even before he'd known who you were. I had pitied him for becoming so attached." He smiled faintly. "I see now that perhaps the one I should have pitied is myself, because I was afraid and denying it."

Lavellan's brows raised. "Afraid?"

"Afraid that I, too, would grow to care for these elves, and be the one left grieving at the end of it all." His look grew sombre. "Or perhaps I will be the one to leave. After all, I no longer know how the Veil has affected the immortality of the Elvhen."

That... hadn't crossed Lavellan's mind. *Would* the ancient elves still hold immortality? Was Solas still immortal? Or would they begin to show signs of aging?

Lavellan wasn't sure which fate was sadder: the everlasting elves suddenly finding themselves as ephemeral as the rest, or the immortals being left by the fleeting.

Would Lavellan age one day and leave Solas?

He scoffed in amusement to himself. That was assuming that he'd live long enough to die of old age.

"You're being surprisingly open," said Lavellan. "Not that I'm complaining. I just... I'm a little surprised, is all."

"I suppose I am practicing."

"Practicing what?"

"Communicating despite the lack of an aura. Your sister keeps taunting me for it. I refuse to be cowed."

Lavellan bit back a laugh. Count on Ellana to use competition and someone's pride to teach them a lesson.

"How goes that, by the way?" asked Lavellan. "Your lessons with Ellana."

"She is... more knowledgeable than I thought."

Lavellan smiled. "She's studied very hard over the years."

"That is apparent." Abelas sighed. "She is... firm."

"You can say stubborn, it's okay. Did you two manage to make up?"

"Partially. I've— My manners were poor. I have done my best to apologise."

Lavellan nodded. "That's good to hear." He paused in consideration. "I may... need you to prepare for battle soon."

Abelas sat up a little straighter. "When?"

"Today, possibly. I recall this was the day that Corypheus attacked the Temple of Sacred Ashes. A new breach may re-open."

"How do you wish for me to prepare? Do you wish for me to request for the other Sentinels' aid?"

"I don't think that's necessary for now. Just be on standby."

"As you wish."

Lavellan didn't feel like having lunch, but he forced himself to eat, knew he'd need the strength.

The hours passed; the meeting grew closer. He roamed Skyhold, visited his companions and had a chat with them, moved around some more. When the time came, he steeled himself and made his way to the War Room. Morrigan caught up to him and they walked side by side.

"How's Kieran?" Lavellan asked to distract himself from the uneasy twisting in his stomach.

"After that entire ordeal with your mother?"

"He is fine," she said. "Though he says he feels like he is less."

"Ah."

They passed through Josephine's office.

"It has occurred to me that if Mythal is my mother, then I am related to the elven gods," said Morrigan.

"Congratulations. You're their half-sister."

She laughed wryly. "I do not think congratulations is the correct response."

"No," he agreed, eyes on the War Room's large doors looming ahead. "Probably not."

They stopped in front of the door but Lavellan didn't have the heart to open it. Thankfully, Morrigan opened it first. Lavellan took a deep breath and walked in.

His advisors were already inside. Every step Lavellan took echoed in the room.

"Did you find what you need, Inquisitor?" asked Leliana.

"A dragon to match a dragon," said Lavellan.

"Then all that remains is to find Corypheus before he comes to us," said Cullen.

His advisors spoke of searching for Corypheus' base. Lavellan kept glancing out the window.

The discussion continued.

Lavellan waited, eyes trained on the skies outside, ready for the inevitable spark of the Anchor responding to the reopened Breach.

"Are we boring you, Inquisitor?" asked Morrigan.

He blinked, glanced at her. "What?"

"You seem quite eager to leave. That, or the windows have suddenly grown fascinating."

"No, sorry, I'm just... restless. Corypheus' silence has me worried."

"And that is the other matter," said Leliana. "It is still uncertain if Corypheus has managed to return to his base. But we can all agree on one thing: his silence is not a good sign. Many are relieved, but this is not over."

"He won't give up that easily," Lavellan agreed.

What was going on? He couldn't recall being able to discuss about finding Corypheus' base at all. Corypheus should have attacked by now. Had they called the meeting too early?

"What do you wish to do, Inquisitor?" asked Josephine. "Should we send word to Orzammar? The Deep Roads are expansive and much of it is hidden. Should we look there?"

"I— Sure. Yeah. We can... We can try. Just be careful with any darkspawn."

Josephine nodded and wrote into her board, and with that, they concluded the meeting. Lavellan walked out of the War Room in a befuddled daze.

What just happened?

A new sense of tension snapped taut within him and he briskly made his way to the rotunda. Solas, Ellana, and Abelas were already there, waiting. They looked up at him.

"What happened?" Solas asked.

Lavellan closed the door behind him and leaned against it, brows furrowing.

"Nothing," said Lavellan, a weight sinking in his stomach.

Corypheus didn't appear for the rest of that day.

Lavellan sat on the edge of his bed, eyes trained on the darkness outside of the balcony, half-expecting the sky to split with emerald.

Solas placed a hand on his shoulder. "Rest," he murmured.

"Why isn't he here?" Lavellan asked, running his hand through his hair. "Is it because all of our troops are back from the Wilds? Because I banished him to the desert? But then, where is he?" He stood, paced, chewing at his lip. "What's he going to do?"

Solas gently grabbed his wrist and stopped him from pacing.

"Rest," he said again. "We will save these questions for the morning."

"What if he attacks while we're sleeping?"

"He is not a quiet creature. You will be woken." He led Lavellan to bed and held him close, carded his fingers through Lavellan's hair. It did calm him, somewhat.

Solas fell asleep first.

Lavellan didn't get much sleep that night.

The next day, Lavellan paced Skyhold's battlements, kept shooting looks at the sky. He'd asked Leliana if her scouts had seen or heard anything, but nothing.

He called Vergala and she perched on his waiting arm.

"Patrol the skies, go as far as you're able," he said.

She cawed and took off. He distracted himself by recording more information from the Well down.

Solas coaxed him to bed again.

No Corypheus that day either.

Lavellan still didn't sleep well.

Nothing on the third day.

Nothing on the fourth.

“Are you sure you didn’t miss *anything*?” he snapped at Leliana. “Small hints or— or clues or... *something*. He’s the loudest piece of shit I’ve ever met, you couldn’t possibly miss him!”

She stared at him, kept her calm. “None. We’ve sent out patrols, several of them, but nothing is shifting in the desert besides the occasional bandits.”

“Interrogate those bandits then!”

“We have. But they had no information on Corypheus, and it didn’t seem like they were lying to hide him either.”

“What about the Venatori and Red Templars? Anything about them? We’ve damaged most of his forces in the Arbor Wilds but there should still be some stragglers.”

“A few Venatori have been spotted and eliminated, but they are mostly detached from Corypheus. Perhaps they’d only followed for Calpernia. Without her leadership, the Venatori are scattered. The same can be said for the Red Templars and Samson.”

Lavellan rubbed his eyes, jaw clenching. Where the *fuck* was Corypheus?

Leliana frowned in concern. “You should get some rest.”

He waved her off and descended into the rotunda where Solas was painting. Lavellan meant to move on, but Solas said, “Sit before you pull a muscle.”

“Is this really the time to be painting?”

“It is precisely the time to be painting. Much is uncertain. It is good to have a distraction.” He stepped back and assessed his current progress. “Fretting will not do us much good. Sit.”

Lavellan rubbed his face and sat on the couch, drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his cloak around himself, buried his face into his scarf. He should make sure the soldiers were ready. Station scouts around the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

He looked up and watched Solas paint what had transpired at the Arbor Wilds.

Lavellan regarded the blank panel beside it, recalled the faint sketch of the final mural that had been imposed upon it. Never finished. He swept his gaze across the murals around the rotunda.

Were they still rife with Solas’ regrets?

“Your murals haven’t changed,” Lavellan murmured.

Solas paused. “No?”

“No. You made the same choices.”

Solas didn’t respond, just continued with his work.

Lavellan stared at the wall again. Solas had left by this time in the past.

Now that his body had stopped moving for a while, the exhaustion of the past few days caught up to him and his eyelids dipped.

When he woke up, he was alone in the rotunda, curled up with his head on the armrest. Someone had slipped a pillow beneath his head.

The Arbor Wilds mural was finished.

By the sixth day, he was ready to pull his teeth out.

Lavellan stood on the battlements and frowned out at the expanse of the Frostbacks before him. He didn't want Corypheus to catch him off-guard like the first time he'd attacked Haven, but how could he even prepare if he didn't know what he was preparing for?

A burst of smoke in his periphery.

"I've gotten too used to knowing what's about to happen next," said Lavellan.

Cole stared at him from beneath the brim of his hat, tilted his head. "Drawing too far back, like the string of a bow. The arrow is swift, slips, slides into what you never wanted. You can't always be light or shadow. Here, and then not, one and then the other. You forgot."

Lavellan frowned, tried to decipher the words, tried to hear what was beneath them.

"You won't hear it," said Cole.

"What are you talking about?"

Cole bowed his head. "Or maybe you never learned. They thought what was wrong was right, so you stayed wrong and right."

"Cole, I'm really not in the right mind to decipher what you're saying right now. Could you be a little more straightforward?"

"You're Change, but when change comes, you don't want it." He shook his head. "You drop a stone in the lake but you hate when the ripples become waves."

"Because too much change is chaos."

"Is that bad?" he asked, and this time, it seemed like a genuine question rather than a rhetorical one.

"Is that bad?" Lavellan repeated, almost in disbelief. "Yes, it—" He grumbled to himself and rubbed his face, too preoccupied with his worries to bother with the question. "I'm sorry Cole, but this really isn't the time for philosophy. I need to plan."

"For what?"

"I don't know!" he exploded. "That's the thing, I don't *know*." He paced and chewed at his lip, the

wind catching on his cloak. Maybe he really would send scouts to the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but he'd need an excuse for that decision. And what about Skyhold? Maybe he should look into fortifying it further too. Increase guards, increase lookouts, check their defences and whether their equipment and machinery were in good shape. Ensure their inventories were enough.

"It's okay if you don't know," said Cole.

"No, it's not. I need to make sure everything's seen to. Damn it, why haven't I seen a guard patrolling the battlements in the time I've been here? I need to tell Cullen to make the rounds more frequent."

Lavellan made his way to Cullen's office, but Cole put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

"It's okay," Cole said again. "You should breathe."

"I'm breathing," he snapped.

A chilly breeze swept past, howling in his ears. Cole stared back at him, the ghostly blue of his eyes calm. Lavellan's shoulders slackened. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, took a breath.

"Sorry," said Lavellan. "I just... Are you able to take this uneasiness away? It's putting me on edge."

Cole shook his head and took his hand off Lavellan's shoulder. "It's tangled. If I try to take it, it'll twist, tear. Try to remember the song from be—"

He cut himself off, stilled.

Lavellan frowned. "Cole?"

Cole remained unresponsive, eyes widening. He whipped his head to look out over the battlements.

"Cole?" he tried again and placed a hand on Cole's arm. "Cole, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," whispered Cole. "A lot of it."

"What—"

Lavellan was hit by a sudden wave of distress from his connection with Vergala. She appeared in the skies, frantically flying towards him, something clutched tight in her claws. He opened his hand and she dropped the item on it.

An Inquisition scout's badge. Bloodstained.

Darkspawn army! said Vergala. *Your enemy is leading them!*

His blood ran cold.

Lavellan closed his hand around the badge and rushed towards Cullen's office.

Chapter End Notes

BATTLE AT SKYHOLD! Ng1, I was expecting this to happen in-game. The moment

Blackwall said something like "this fortress is defensible, we'll see corypheus coming"
I immediately thought, oh final boss fight is gonna be here huh?

And then it wasn't!

I also watched a video reviewing Skyhold's defensibility and it's actually rated pretty well, game mechanics and limitations aside! I thought it'd be a waste not to explore that.

(Psst, are you starved for more appreciation for platonic love? I wrote [another tapestry piece](#) focusing on solas & dirth's friendship)

The darkness came

Chapter Notes

for narrative purposes because i cannot understand how anybody can reach skyhold, pretend the inquisition had built a path to the bridge's gatehouse instead of it just being propped up on a spur of rock.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

with poisoned breaths

Skyhold exploded with activity. They evacuated neighbouring settlements, put the castle's defences in place, and geared the soldiers for battle. Civilians within Skyhold were ushered through the eluvian along with any Grey Wardens into Mythal's Temple under the Sentinels' watch. The Grey Wardens had tried to stay on the basis that they could deal with darkspawn the best, but Lavellan couldn't risk them being controlled by Corypheus. They only agreed because of Leliana's reassurances, veteran of the Fifth Blight and all.

The inner circle and a few high-ranking officers gathered in Cullen's office, a schematic of Skyhold spread out over the table.

"I will call the Sentinels for aid," said Abelas.

"No," said Lavellan. "Your numbers are already too small. Just stay at the temple and look after those who'd been evacuated."

"Then *I* will stay."

Lavellan considered arguing, but he suspected that wouldn't go anywhere. He sighed instead and nodded. "Leliana, what's the situation?"

"I have sent a group of skirmishers out to sabotage their progress and ensure no other civilians are in danger," she reported.

"Ideally, we would flank them from behind as well," said Cullen, "but we don't have the numbers."

"I have sent requests for aid to Redcliffe, Denerim, and Val Royeaux," said Josephine. "For whatever that is worth."

Cullen massaged his temple. "They can provide relief, but it will take a while to mobilise their forces. That means it's up to us to hold out for the night." He looked at Leliana. "How much time do we have before the darkspawn arrive?"

"My scouts sent ravens back reporting that they've reached the pass. It's an opportune place for a sabotage, so we have an hour. Optimistically, an hour and a half."

Lavellan leaned over the table, regarded Skyhold's schematics. "Has the drawbridge been raised?"

“Yes, Inquisitor,” said Cullen. “The mages have also enchanted it and any flammable areas in the baileys with fire-resistant runes and wards. They’ve primed the bridge and the path to it with numerous elemental mines as well.”

“Are the mages stationed with the archers now?”

“They are. The rest of the soldiers are awaiting instructions in the baileys, ready in the event of a breach.”

“*Could* they breach?” asked Josephine. “Skyhold is very defensible. We have two gatehouses.”

Leliana shook her head. “Two ogres have been spotted among them. I do not know if any of you recall, but King Cailan perished to an ogre at the Battle of Ostagar.”

“Shit,” whispered Varric.

“They’re walking siege weapons,” Lavellan agreed, recalling the few ogres he’d encountered in the Deep Roads. “And there’s the also the dragon. We can’t afford to underestimate them.” Not again.

“What I don’t understand is why Corypheus didn’t do this from the start,” said Dorian. “Why only now?”

“Out of options?” Varric suggested.

“If he wished to be seen as a god,” said Morrigan, “then ‘twould be poor image to be seen walking among the darkspawn when he proclaims to be a higher being. Better to be seen with an army who worships him.”

“How’d he even do this?” Bull asked. “I thought darkspawn only listened to archdemons.”

“Tabris and I met another of the Magisters Sidereal a number of years ago,” said Leliana. “He called himself the Architect, and he had the ability to loosely command the darkspawn. I assume Corypheus has a similar pull.”

“It doesn’t matter why or how now!” said Sera. “He’s coming and he’s got a bunch of baddies, so we stop talking and start shooting. Why’re we still talking?”

“Because we require a strategy,” snapped Vivienne. “We are trapped inside.”

“There are wards within Skyhold,” Solas said. Everyone looked at him. “Ancient wards built to repel creatures of darkness like the darkspawn.”

“Can they be activated?” asked Lavellan.

Solas frowned. “I am uncertain. They may be unstable and cannot hold for long, and I suspect they will require constant maintenance as well. It will also take a while to prime them.”

“How long to prime them?”

“Just over an hour.”

“Get it done. What do you need?”

“Lyrium and mages who are skilled in wards. Preferably elven mages due to their higher sense of the Veil.”

Lavellan nodded. “The lyrium supplies have already been brought out so get what you need. Take Grand Enchanter Fiona with you and whoever you or she chooses. Vivienne, can you lead the rest of the mages in her stead?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Then that’s done. Go, quick.”

Solas went with Vivienne. Lavellan looked at Cullen.

“Commander, I want batches of hot oil ready to be poured into the main gatehouse if they breach the outer portcullis.”

Cullen gestured at one of the captains in the room. They saluted and left.

They went back and forth over the strategies, planned counterattacks. Cassandra suggested destroying the bridge, but that would be a waste of supplies and would take too much time that they didn’t have. The Undercroft was also a large and open entrance, but since it opened out to the side of the mountain and not even the darkspawn could climb that steep of an incline, they left it be.

Dagna gave him the prototype of a crystal derived from the memory crystals they’d used with Calpernia. For direct communication, but there was only one pair. Lavellan attached the small crystal to Vergala’s leg and wore the other as a bracelet.

“If you want to relay an important message to me,” said Lavellan to the others, “raise your Inquisition badge so she can find you. Tap the crystal to begin communications. I may also send instructions if need be.”

They nodded.

Once they settled on a plan, everybody fanned out.

Night was on the cusp of falling, daylight set to fade. Lavellan stood on the stairs where he’d been appointed Inquisitor, looked over the sea of his soldiers’ grim faces, and took a deep breath.

“Our enemy marches towards us once more,” he said, “but we will not be cowed! We have bested him time and time again, come Venatori or Red Templars or false archdemons, and we will best him again. Show them that we are the Inquisition, that all our parts work to make this a whole. Bare your teeth and show the grit and bravery that you have honed and shown throughout all of our battles!” He raised his fist. “Harden your souls. We will fight through this night!”

They raised their swords and weapons, roared their battle cries.

“For the Herald!”

“For the Inquisition!”

Lavellan felt sick inside.

“Cover your mouths!” Leliana instructed at the sea of soldiers. The soldiers covered their mouths

with the masks usually reserved for their scouts. “Do not allow their bodily fluids to enter your bloodstream. Cover any openings, including open wounds. If you can, focus on attacks that will minimise the blood that they will shed.”

Lavellan wrapped Revasha’s hunting charm around his bow, checked his flasks, tightened the tie in his hair. He felt along his connection to the guardian dragon and called upon her with a rush of urgency. The false archdemon would arrive soon too.

The mountain air was thin, yet it moved like tar in his lungs.

Leliana finished instructing the soldiers and everybody rushed to their places.

All the walls sectioning off Skyhold’s baileys were closed, and their mages and archers lined the battlements and towers. Commander Cullen and the melee fighters remained in formation in the baileys, ready behind the gates.

Lavellan stood at the battlements above the main gate with the archers, hand tight around his bow.

Ellana passed him on the way to her designated tower and they shared a long embrace.

“Stay safe,” he whispered.

“You too.”

They let each other go reluctantly. Lavellan faced the Frostbacks once more.

Varric stood beside Lavellan and took a deep breath, let it out slowly as he readied Bianca, its mechanisms snapping and clicking into place.

“Grand showdown at Skyhold,” said Varric. “Hawke’s going to be pissed that she missed out on this.”

“It’s alright, it’s my time to be the main character anyway,” Lavellan said, attempting to be light.

“How’s that been treating you?”

“Poorly.”

Varric barked out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s how it goes. Don’t worry, I’ll make you an amazing lead in the book. I’ll treat you nicely.”

“Make sure I’m funny.”

“Glowy, you’re going to be cracking jokes left and right. That’s going to be your legacy. The Inquisitor was hilarious, that’s what they’ll say.”

Lavellan smiled. “Cassandra said the same thing.”

“I have a feeling she was scolding instead of praising you.”

He chuckled in answer, but the churning in his stomach was quick to return. Varric’s smile faded as well. They stood solemnly while the others around them murmured about making sure they had enough arrows, passed supplies, and shared extra potions.

Lavellan looked up at Vergala’s circling form, then back out at the distance. Waiting.

“It won’t be like Haven,” said Varric, reassuring. Lavellan wasn’t sure who the reassurance was for. “We’re ready.”

“We are.” Except, he wasn’t. This was new, this was— He was a fool. He shouldn’t have expected stagnancy from Corypheus, shouldn’t have expected that he’d follow the same course. Solas and Lavellan had both underestimated him. Lavellan could only hope that his underestimation wouldn’t lead to consequences that were as dire as the Conclave.

Either way, this couldn’t go on. He was going to kill Corypheus tonight. He would make sure of it.

Sera wordlessly appeared beside Lavellan. She’d been further down the battlements a while ago, but he said nothing about it and didn’t comment on how close she was standing or on the small tremor of her hands as she plucked at her bowstring. Lavellan brushed their arms together in silent reassurance.

Vergala’s two caws pierced the night. She flew through the battlements, repeating her warning caws, and everybody leapt to attention.

In the distance, the darkness writhed.

Everyone held their breaths.

Lavellan secured his grip on his bow, stretched out his smallest finger and rubbed it against Revasha’s hunting charm, tied just below the grip. He patted the pockets with the stone and earring, fixed the halla bone amulet so that it would sit flat beneath his shirt. Lavellan spotted the fox carving tied around Varric’s belt, the honeycomb around Sera’s quiver.

He steeled his resolve.

They would be victorious tonight. They had to be.

The distant sounds of a thousand marching footsteps advanced towards Skyhold and the outline of the darkspawn army appeared.

Their only way in would be through the bridge — he mentally thanked Solas and his military background for Skyhold’s design — so they had to cull the darkspawn’s numbers as fast as possible while they were stuck there. The Inquisition would be outnumbered otherwise. The ogres would also throw boulders at the drawbridge to destroy it, so they had to work quick before that could happen.

The darkspawn’s shrieks and groans and roars echoed in the night. They charged up the path to the bridge. A whole mass of them. They were a walking darkness, a plague on foot.

The Inquisition met them with a focused silence. Lavellan closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath.

His thoughts strayed to Skyhold’s garden. The darkspawn destroyed whatever they touched, destroyed the land where their blood would spill. He hoped the garden would survive mostly unscathed.

The field of elemental mines before the first watchtower triggered. Fire and lightning exploded, and the night lit up with flashes of magic.

An acrid smell bogged down the crisp, winter breeze.

Darkspawn corpses tumbled off the sheer cliffs opposite the fortress. Black stained the snow.

Two ogres among their ranks stepped over their comrades' corpses and hefted sizeable boulders over their heads. They threw it at the first watchtower's portcullis. Stone slammed into metal and the air rang shrilly. Lavellan winced.

"Where's Corypheus?" Varric asked over the blares of magical explosions and collision against metal.

True enough, Corypheus was nowhere among the darkspawn. Where was Corypheus and his dragon?

A harrowing shriek filled the skies.

Ah, there was one out of two.

The Inquisition soldiers shifted nervously, weapons raising.

Corypheus' dragon swooped from the night sky and perched on the first watchtower, tore at the portcullises with its claws. The metal gave with a shriek. The dragon flung the gates away and returned to the skies.

"Well," said Varric, "shit."

"Ready!" Lavellan ordered. The archers along the battlements nocked their arrows while the mages on the towers readied their staffs.

The darkspawn roared and charged through the destroyed gates.

"Aim!" He drew his bow.

The darkspawn flooded onto the bridge. The mines flashed and streaks of lightning zipped through the throng.

"Fire!"

A hail of arrows and spells followed. The enemies fell, picked off by cruel arrowheads or magic, but the rest clambered over their corpses, battering at the drawbridge. Some returned fire. Lavellan and the archers hid behind the merlons for cover and continued shooting through the arrow slits. Mages erected barriers and continued their assault. Those in a better position hurled grenades.

His bracelet glowed. "*Inquisitor,*" came Cullen's voice, "*what's the situation?*"

"Dragon destroyed the portcullises," said Lavellan, shot another arrow through the slit.

"Darkspawn are on the bridge and returning fire."

Dead darkspawn piled atop the bridge, black blood slipping over the stones.

The ogres from earlier marched through, kicking aside the bodies in the way, a number of darkspawn carting some boulders behind them.

"Think they can break through?" Sera yelled over the din.

Both ogres threw a boulder at the drawbridge. The metal-reinforced wood dented.

The mages focused their attacks on the ogres and they staggered, roared. One threw a boulder at

the lower battlements. The mages yelled and backed away. The boulder broke a few merlons and crushed those who'd been too slow to move.

Lavellan's stomach turned and he forced himself to look away, peered through the arrow slit, but there was no reprieve there either. The wave of darkspawn filing onto the bridge was never-ending.

Shit, and this wasn't even a Blight.

The false archdemon returned, headed straight towards the gate tower he was on.

Lavellan's heart dropped.

"Get back!" he yelled. "Drop!"

Everyone scrambled back from the walls and dropped to the ground just as the dragon spat fire at the drawbridge below them, their visions momentarily filling with heat and light. But it didn't catch. The fire-resistant enchantment deterred it.

The dragon clawed at it instead. The ground beneath him shook from the impact.

Wood splintered apart and metal whined. The darkspawn jeered as the dragon ripped the drawbridge away from its chains and flung it aside.

Well, shit.

Lavellan gritted his teeth and shot at the dragon as it returned to the skies. Missed.

He felt along his connection to the guardian. She was on the way.

Corypheus' dragon dove for the soldiers in the bailey, maw opening for a blast of fire. The soldiers scattered and yelled for cover—

The air pulsed, sang.

The dragon crashed into an invisible wall and was repelled by a force, the point of collision rippling with blue and travelling down, hinting at the shape of a dome around the fortress. On the bridge, the darkspawn rushing over the now broken drawbridge were blasted back.

Lavellan let out a disbelieving breath of laughter and pushed himself up, kept firing at the darkspawn through the slits. They've done it. Solas had done it. The wards were working!

But the darkspawn's arrows still zipped past the wards. Shit, that was right. The wards couldn't protect from physical attacks.

Corypheus' dragon shook its disorientation off, coasted over the dome in investigation. It stopped and hovered above it, as though in thought.

It opened his mouth, the back of its throat glowing with approaching fire.

"Quisitree," said Sera, paling. "Wards do squat against fire, right? *Right?*"

He urged Vergala to fly to Cullen and yelled into the bracelet, "Cullen, get everyone away!"

"Take cover!" Cullen ordered in the bailey. The soldiers below scrambled.

The dragon released its breath, the streak of fire passing through the wards and exploding upon the

bailey. Shouts of alarm rose. Those who'd been caught by the blast shrieked. The dragon turned its head towards the battlements.

"Fall back!" said Lavellan. "Back inside the tower! Mages, barriers!"

The archers fled into the watchtowers while the mages covered for their escape. The false archdemon circled the fortress, spat fire at the battlements. The mages couldn't keep up and retreated as well.

A streak of fire headed towards Lavellan's area.

"Piss, piss, piss," Sera said as they ran.

They might not make it.

Lavellan lunged and shoved Varric and Sera out of the way, just narrowly avoided the point of impact himself. The force of its collision sent him sprawling to the side, hard stone scraping against his breastplate. His bow skidded out of his hand

"Mahanon!" Varric called, went back for him.

"You dumb shite!" cried Sera.

"I'm alright!" He pushed himself up with a wince, retrieved his bow.

The vats of oil were aflame. Shit.

Varric and Sera hauled him up and they retreated into one of the adjacent towers just as one of the vats exploded. They closed the door, panting.

Inside was packed with soldiers, looking to him for instruction. Lavellan peered out the narrow windows. The dragon was still circling the fortress, ravaging them with a rain of fire.

"Is everyone alright?" asked Lavellan. Murmurs of assent.

"We're sitting ducks here," muttered one of the soldiers.

The bracelet glowed again. *"Is everyone alright, Inquisitor?"* asked Cullen.

"We've taken shelter in the watchtowers," said Lavellan. "How are the bailey soldiers?"

"Some have taken shelter in the Keep. Others ran to the watchtowers as well."

"Inquisitor, what should we do?" asked a soldier.

He felt along his connection to the guardian dragon again. She was almost here. "Reinforcement is close. She'll take care of the dragon."

"How close?" asked Cullen.

"Few more minutes."

A flash of light then a terrible sound came from outside — stone against metal. The ground shuddered beneath their feet.

"The dragon's fire has weakened the portcullis metal," Cullen reported. *"The ogres are throwing*

boulders.”

“I thought the wards were supposed to help!” cried one of the archers.

“They’re wards, not barriers. They’re useless against physical damage,” said one of the mages.
“Sustaining a large barrier over the fortress isn’t simple either.”

“Stay calm,” said Lavellan even if he felt anything but. “It doesn’t seem like the darkspawn have a cohesive strategy besides running us over with numbers. We’ve already dealt considerable damage to them while they were trying to cross the bridge. The dragon just needs to go.”

A roar echoed in the distance, different from the archdemon’s shrill shrieks. This was fuller. Lavellan almost collapsed in relief.

“We need to go back outside and keep culling the darkspawn’s numbers while the wards are still working,” he said.

A nervous murmur swept through them.

“But Inquisitor, the dragon?”

He smiled. “I’d like you all to meet a friend.” He made his way through to the door on the other side of the tower. “Don’t go back to the central battlement, the oil’s made a mess there. It isn’t safe.”

With that warning, he opened the door to the eastern battlements and rushed out.

The false archdemon’s gaze locked onto him and it shrieked, preparing to breathe fire—

The guardian’s golden form zipped through the skies with an almighty roar and she rammed into the false archdemon.

Down in the courtyard, Bull’s triumphant whoops triggered the soldiers to join him.

“Thank fuck!” said Varric.

“Get back into position and keep firing at the darkspawn,” Lavellan ordered, and everyone renewed their attacks. A few runners came and delivered more arrows and grenades. Others rushed to heal any injured or take them away.

The dragons raged above, lighting up the night sky with their fire.

However, Skyhold’s outer portcullis had been broken, the ward being the only thing preventing the darkspawn from filing in and destroying the inner portcullis.

The ogres had to go before the wards could fall.

He told Vergala to fly to Vivienne and relayed his order. The mages focused on the ogres.

Lavellan returned to firing arrow after arrow at the rest.

The ogres threw boulders at the mages, but they were ready that time and force mages pushed the boulders away.

His back muscles began to tire. No rest in sight. The wave of darkspawn never stopped. How many corpses were piling in the ravine below the bridge?

After long last, the ogres fell.

Nobody had the breath to cheer. They could only keep up their barrage with the occasional moment to recover.

“Not to be repetitive,” huffed Varric, both of them slumped against the merlon, resting momentarily, “but where’s Corypheus?”

Lavellan clenched his jaw. “I don’t know. Either way, this feels more like a desperate move. Throwing numbers at us.”

“I don’t trust desperate people. That’s when they screw you over.” He reloaded his crossbow, his bolts glowing with inscriptions along its surface. Elemental bolts. He returned to his attacks. Lavellan rested for a few seconds longer before he returned as well.

A few more minutes later, the dragons roared above them once more. Lavellan checked in on the guardian’s state, sensed that she’d been injured, but they were minor.

The two dragons grappled, clawing and biting at one another, golden and black figures writhing in the skies.

A wave of triumph washed over him. Her triumph.

She bit at the false archdemon’s neck. It shrieked. She flung it to a nearby mountainside and a cloud of white billowed in the air upon impact. She roared at the skies in victory.

A rumble rippled through the night. From near the peak, a slab of snow dislodged and crumbled down. Avalanche. It was too far to be a worry for them, but not so for Corypheus’ dragon.

The dragon didn’t rise.

That roaring rush of snow buried it.

Gone.

Lavellan leaned against the merlon, trembled from relief as the Inquisition roared their cheers. He tapped into the Well once more to communicate with the guardian. Varric started and cursed when Lavellan glowed.

“Thank you,” Lavellan said.

Her acknowledgement pressed against him. Instead of flying away, she flew down and hovered in front of him, their eyes meeting, her mighty wingbeats creating a strong gust that flung any incoming arrows aside. The archers along the battlements scrambled back in alarm. But she did nothing else, just rumbled at him.

One more favour, said her intent.

Her brows raised. Oh. Was this for helping her? Still, she was injured from fighting the false archdemon, so he had to be careful.

“Damage the darkspawn’s numbers,” he said, *“but leave whenever you feel that you need to go recuperate from your wounds.”*

She brushed her acknowledgement against him and turned, flew at the darkspawn on the bridge with a roar and torched them with her breath. She coasted over the seemingly never-ending army

and continued her fiery assault.

“Maferath’s hairy backside,” said Varric with a nervous laugh, ogling the dragon. Sera giggled. “You sure you’re not an ancient elven prince who can talk to animals, Glow?”

“Very sure,” he said with a breathless laugh. Some of his morale returned and he raised his voice. “Inquisition! We have a dragon fighting for us for a while. Make good use of the time she buys us, keep fighting!”

They responded with a chorus of determined roars.

Everyone intensified their attacks, their spirits lifted. They could do this. Maybe they could even eliminate the darkspawn or force them to flee before they could breach Skyhold.

They may just get out of this alive.

The wards flickered.

Lavellan paused, examining the sky.

They flickered once more, a ripple of blue.

“Oh,” said Sera, her voice bordering on despairing. “What is it *now*?”

“Don’t you dare,” he whispered to whatever merciful sod of a god existed out there.

The air shuddered, a shrill whine echoing in the night. His stomach sank.

The wards collapsed, like a dome of ice melting from the top.

Below them, the darkspawn grunted and jeered in mocking. They wasted no time in rushing into the gatehouse, battering at the final portcullis. Lavellan felt like he’d swallowed a burning stone.

Before the others could get demoralised, he snapped, “Keep going!”

The others jerked back into action, shot at the horde of darkspawn clamouring to enter the fortress. They could have used the oils from earlier if the dragon hadn’t destroyed it, but they had to make do. At the very least, there was still some time before the final portcullis falls, and the guardian had damaged a considerable portion of the darkspawn army.

A riotous noise echoed from within the gatehouse. Boorish grunting and shrieking and rumbling metal.

Rumbling metal?

The soldiers in the bailey yelled in alarm and fell into their defensive positions. What was going on?

The darkspawn flooded into the baileys.

“What?!” cried one of the archers.

“How did they get in?”

He told Vergala to fly to Cullen again. “Commander,” he snapped into the bracelet, “what’s going on?”

“Someone’s opened the portcullis! It’s unclear whether we have traitors or infiltrators or both.”

“You’re shitting me,” said Lavellan. He turned to the archers and assigned some of them to enter the gatehouse’s inner walls and shoot at the darkspawn in the gatehouse. “The rest of you, I want half to keep attacking the bridge, the other half attack into the bailey! Assist the melee fighters!”

They split up, archers positioned on either side of the battlements.

Darkspawn and Inquisition soldiers clashed, a mess of thrashing bodies and sparks of metal scattered all over the bailey. Lavellan kept firing arrows despite the ache in his back and feet. His hands and arms trembled from fatigue and adrenaline.

A few darkspawn slashed through the soldiers guarding the stairs to the battlements.

Lavellan put his bow away and capped his quiver, ordered one of the nearby captains to take charge, and smashed a flask of lightning over himself. He pulled up his mask, unsheathed his daggers, and rushed at the darkspawn. No matter what, they couldn’t take the battlements.

He positioned himself at the base of the steps, fought off any darkspawn that got close, assisted by the soldiers and given cover fire by the archers.

One of the hurlocks shot an arrow at him.

Lavellan moved, had the sinking feeling that he wouldn’t make it—

A familiar wash of ambient magic coated him and a barrier shimmered to life around him and the surrounding soldiers. It deflected the arrow. The hurlock fell after an immolating spell. Within a Fade-step, Solas was beside Lavellan, a steady hand on his back.

“Are you alright?” asked Solas, eyes worried above his mask.

Lavellan swallowed back a cry. “I’m fine.”

“The wards gave,” he said as he cast his spells and Lavellan slashed through the nearby darkspawn. “They have degraded too much.”

“It still bought us good time!” He ducked a slash and countered, being careful not to spill too much blood. “But someone opened the portcullis from inside. The guardian dragon is helping cull the numbers some, but I can feel she’s reaching her limit. She’ll leave soon.”

Fuck, he was tired.

He kept tearing through the wave of enemies regardless. Not yet. He couldn’t rest yet.

Lavellan ushered more soldiers up on the battlements as another layer of defence for the archers in case any darkspawn make it up there.

How had this entire thing gone so fucking wrong? Ripples of change. He’d created a tsunami instead. How could he have underestimated Corypheus? He should have learned by now. Idiot!

They just had to last the night. Then reinforcements from Ferelden and Orlais would arrive and they could be relieved—

The nerves in his hand tingled.

Lavellan’s entire body grew cold. The Anchor flashed.

A short distance away from Skyhold, light exploded across the sky and split it open with green.

Chapter End Notes

lavellan and the terrible horrible no good very bad night. at least doing dental work for a dragon apparently makes her a bit more amenable to barbecuing your enemies for you

here, come look at this [art of the sad elf sandwich](#) sharing a bed done by j-k-u to soothe your soul

And struck the sun

Chapter Notes

haha... so i heard da4 might be set 8 years after trespasser...

im scared

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

down from its perch

The reopened Breach throbbed in the distance, an ominous emerald storm. He bit back the frustrated cry attempting to claw out his throat.

The Anchor burst with light and pain and Lavellan stumbled, almost dropped his daggers. His vision blurred. The sound of the fighting dulled in his ears.

“Mahanon!”

Solas grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close, threw a barrier around them in time to deflect the darkspawn attacking them. He shot a streak of lightning at it, the current jumping from enemy to enemy. They seized from the spell, and the soldiers swept in and struck them before they could recover.

Lavellan tried to say something, but another wave of pain flooded him to his jaw and all that came out was a choked, “Nnh—!” He buried his face into Solas’ shoulder, heat gathering behind his eyelids.

What— This felt even worse than last time.

“Hold on, vhenan,” Solas said, holding him tighter. “I have you.”

Solas slammed his staff down and a powerful force radiated from him, flung any incoming darkspawn away. He moved and Lavellan could only hold on to him and follow, breathing through the pain, couldn’t register his immediate surroundings. Were the flashes of light from the Anchor or Solas’ spells?

“Guard the door,” Solas said to somebody and they entered somewhere dim. The Anchor’s light flashed like an aurora in the gloom. Solas guided him into sitting onto something hard. A chair?

Lavellan’s head lolled forward, his chin hitting the edge of his breastplate. The impact jarred some lucidity back into him. He blinked, took in his surroundings. The tavern. Empty. Solas was kneeling in front of him, holding his left hand to stabilise the Anchor. The pain ebbed slowly. Outside, the fighting raged.

“I need to close the Breach,” Lavellan rasped out, tasted smoke and lightning at the back of his throat. “He’s luring me out.”

Solas frowned, the light of the Anchor flashing in his eyes. “How will you reach it? It is still quite

the distance to cover.”

“You mentioned in Elvhenan that there were tunnels under Skyhold. Are they still viable?”

“Yes.”

“So I could go through there, then cross the frozen river to the other side.”

Solas finished stabilising the Anchor and its light vanished, plunging them back into the tavern’s dimness.

“We,” said Solas.

“What?”

“We will cross the river. I will not let you confront him alone.”

Lavellan pressed his lips into a tight line. He’d taken the inner circle with him last time, but he couldn’t afford to deprive the Inquisition of their martial aptitude this time. “I need as many skilled fighters as possible to remain in Skyhold and assist the soldiers.”

“Then take a small team. Do not be foolish.”

War cries echoed from outside. Lavellan wrung his fingers, paused, blinked down at his empty hands. Where—?

Solas presented him with his daggers.

“Thank you,” Lavellan murmured, took and sheathed them as he stood. He appraised Solas. Uninjured save for the cut on his arm, his sleeve splotted with red. Lavellan dug into his pouch and took out the roll of bandages, quickly wrapped it up. Open wounds were a plea to be tainted. Solas’ constitution could probably handle it, but he’d still been weakened and Lavellan wasn’t going to take any chances.

They shared a grim look and a nod, and rushed out of the tavern. Lavellan started when he saw that Cassandra had been the one guarding the doors along with a few soldiers.

“Inquisitor!” she cried in relief, brought her shield up in time to block a darkspawn.

Lavellan and Solas dove in to help.

“I have to close the Breach!” Lavellan yelled over the din of the battle, dodged a genlock’s war hammer. He closed in for the kill. “Corypheus is likely waiting to ambush me.”

“I will go with you,” said Cassandra without him needing to ask. He smiled.

“Where’s Cullen?” He sidestepped another genlock’s swing, struck into the vulnerable slots of its armour. “I need to tell him the plan!”

She bashed her shield into a hurlock and stabbed into its neck. “At the lower bailey!”

“Cover me!” he told Solas and slipped behind him, called for Vergala to go to Cullen.

“Commander!” he said into the bracelet.

“Inquisitor! The Breach!”

“I’m going to close it. I’ll take a few of the inner circle with me and we’ll go through the tunnels under Skyhold.”

“May the gods watch over you, Inquisitor.”

Solas stepped in front of a darkspawn trying to reach Lavellan and blasted them back with a snap of the Veil. Lavellan shot his back a wry smile. Well, he had one here.

“Don’t die on me, Cullen.”

“You as well, Mahanon.”

“I’m going to give the communication bracelet to Leliana so you two can coordinate.”

He relayed the same message to Leliana then Vivienne.

“I’m coming with you!” joined Dorian’s voice. He must have been near Vivienne. *“Where are you? I’ll come down through the battlements!”*

“We’re near the tavern.”

“He’s off,” said Vivienne. *“Take care, Inquisitor. Bring back Corypheus’ head.”*

“I will.”

The crystal dimmed. Lavellan called Vergala to him and retrieved his bow to shoot at the enemies while waiting. When she arrived, he removed his bracelet and gave it to her. She took it, her emotions and intent pressing against him.

Be safe, she said and took off.

He soon spotted Dorian descending the battlements and clearing a path for himself — and Varric? — with arcs of lightning.

“Let’s go!” said Lavellan once the two reached them.

Solas led the way. Lavellan opened sunders to clear the path or stop the darkspawn from following. Pinpricks of heat raced up his nerves. He clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on his bow, extended his smallest finger again to feel for Revasha’s charm. His finger brushed against smooth wood. Lavellan’s face fell. He looked at the bow.

Revasha’s charm was gone. Had it fallen off?

He looked back at the throng of fighting, heart in his throat. When had he lost it?

But there was no time to stop. He murmured an apology to Revasha.

They entered the door that would lead to the cells, barred it, and rushed down the long stairs. They pulled their masks down to catch their breaths.

Solas stopped halfway through the stairs and felt along the walls, then placed his hand flat on a particular brick. Green light flooded the spaces between the stones and the bricks parted, revealed another set of stairs.

“Come,” said Solas and they hurried down it into a system of tunnels. He lit the way with mage light for the others.

“I did not know Skyhold had tunnels,” said Cassandra, her voice echoing.

“It is a defensive fortress,” said Solas. “It is good practice to build other avenues of escape.”

“How are we getting to the Breach?” asked Varric.

“River’s frozen,” said Lavellan.

“Still a bit of distance to cover. Let’s hope the snow isn’t thick.”

Solas took several turns that sent Lavellan’s head spinning. The air tasted stale at the back of Lavellan’s throat.

“Are these tunnels a bloody maze?” asked Dorian. “Solas, how do you know where to go?”

“Curiosity and a little exploration. It is fortuitous that most of it is still intact.”

The air grew chillier as they took a turn, and there, finally, was the end of the tunnels. They hurried their pace.

Lavellan’s hand flared green. Another pulse of pain.

He dropped his bow with a cry and staggered, caught himself against the wall. His companions’ concerned exclamations reverbed around him. Solas took his hand and stabilised the mark.

“This is a little too familiar,” said Lavellan, laughing thinly. “Racing against the Breach with this company. Ah, Dorian wasn’t with us yet though.”

“Trade the demons for darkspawn,” Varric added, gave Lavellan a smile that he’d likely meant to be light-hearted, but his worry made it look like more of a grimace.

The pain abated and Solas released Lavellan’s hand, his expression tight. He cupped the back of Lavellan’s neck and briefly tapped their foreheads together.

“Just a little further,” said Solas.

Lavellan smiled, but it felt empty.

Dorian returned his bow. Together, they left the tunnels and faced the glittering surface of the frozen river, the Breach’s emerald flares reflected on the ice. Skyhold’s walls were imposing from here. The faint sounds of the battle raged in the night.

“Think it’s safe to walk?” asked Varric, checking the river’s surface.

“I will shape a thin platform using the Veil in case,” said Solas. “Dorian?”

“I think I can help, yes.”

Lavellan frowned. “Won’t that eat up a lot of mana—”

A roar tore through the air. Lavellan looked up, the guardian’s golden form circling above them. She plucked at their connection and he opened it. Her intent pressed against him.

“She’s about to leave,” he told the others. “But...” He faltered, eyes widening. “But she—”

Is that alright? he asked her.

Her agreement brushed against him.

“She’s offering to give us a ride,” said Lavellan.

Varric burst out laughing. “What, are you serious?”

“Apparently.”

“Well, don’t turn down a damn dragon, Glowy! Better than falling through the ice.”

Yes, please, thank you! said Lavellan.

The guardian descended and landed on the banks in front of them, kicked up a cloud of snow from her arrival. They hurried to her and she rumbled at him. He held her snout and quickly scanned her for injuries, frowned at the gashes on her underbelly and legs.

Are you sure? he asked again, accompanied his worry with the question.

She growled.

“Okay, okay.”

The guardian lowered her head and brought her front limb up near her head so they could use it as a step. They clambered onto her neck, manoeuvred themselves behind the small spikes along her nape. Lavellan sat in front.

“Where are the safety handles on this thing?” asked Dorian from the back.

“Hold onto each other!” said Lavellan.

“Oh sweet Andraste.”

Lavellan gripped the pair of blunted spikes in front of him. Solas wrapped his arms around Lavellan's middle.

“Ever rode a dragon before?” asked Lavellan.

“I cannot say I have. Can you?”

“Void, no.”

The guardian stood, unfurled her wings. She crouched.

And took off. Someone screamed.

The wind whipped at their faces as she soared and Lavellan ducked his head, squinted from the force of the wind. Once she was high enough, he could see Skyhold below him and the horde of darkspawn rushing in through the bridge. From this much higher, he could see that the darkspawn army *did* have an end. Some were even retreating.

She brushed a question against him.

He tightened his grip and sent a grim approval back.

“Hold on!” cried Lavellan.

“*I am!*” Dorian shrieked.

The guardian flew at the darkspawn. Lavellan felt a surging warmth from below him as she opened her maw.

She coasted over the army and spat a stream of unforgiving fire into the dark mass of them. The darkspawn shot arrows. She flew higher and out of range. Lavellan gripped tighter with his hands and thighs to keep himself grounded, his heart either dropping or clogging his throat as she wove through the air and kept breathing fire at them.

After damaging enough of their numbers, the guardian turned and headed towards the Breach. That should buy the others in Skyhold some time.

The sky pulsed. His hand flashed.

Solas reached forward and placed his hand over Lavellan's, smothered the reaction before it could flare into pain.

"Save your strength," said Lavellan.

"I am. I am saving it for important situations." He gripped Lavellan's hand tighter. Warm.

They neared the Breach, and the Veil grew erratic, skittered over Lavellan's skin. Parts of the forest directly beneath the Breach were being torn from the earth, gravitating towards the rip in the Veil. Lavellan scanned the land for any signs of Corypheus.

There! Beneath the Breach, on a floating hunk of rock, his arm raised, the orb hovering in his hand as it spun with red and emerald light. He was likely accelerating the Breach's expansion.

The guardian stopped once she was at the forest's border, her hesitance and distress grating against him like sandpaper.

"She can't go further!" said Lavellan. "The Breach might drive her mad."

"Well!" said Dorian. "We wouldn't that, yes? Considering that we are on her *back*."

We'll make our way through the forest ourselves, he said. You return and recuperate.

She landed at the borders of the forest and they slipped off her back. She turned to look at him, rumbled, and he pressed his forehead to her snout.

"Thank you," he whispered.

The guardian huffed out a warm, gentle breath through her nostrils and rumbled once more. She lifted her head and spread her wings. They backed away. She took off into the skies, left wind and snow whipping in her wake.

Lavellan resecured the tie in his hair.

"Let's go," he said.

They headed into the forest. The Veil was both distended and contracted here, fluctuating between both states. His skin crawled.

"Watch out for any demons," said Lavellan.

Not even five steps in before the trees around them creaked.

Then, the branches whipped at them.

“Shit!” Lavellan ducked a swing, stumbled over another that swept at his feet.

The trees around them twisted, branches bending as though they were made of flesh rather than bark, their trunks splitting to form legs. Bark warped and made a facsimile of a snarling face. They tore their roots from the earth and filled the air with the sounds of snapping.

“Sylvans!” cried Cassandra.

The sylvans whipped their arms at them. He ducked another branch, but one caught him in the gut and wrapped around his middle. It yanked him up, reared back to throw him—

Lavellan hacked at the branch with his daggers. The sylvan shrieked and dropped him into the snow, black sap oozing from its cuts.

He pushed himself up with a groan, the halla amulet barrier flashing around him. There'd never been any reports of sylvans here. The Breach must have pulled spirits into the waking world and driven them mad.

Dorian slapped a branch away with his staff and readied a fire spell.

“Don’t use fire!” Solas snapped.

“What do you mean don’t use *fire*? It’s the best way to deal with these creatures!” A branch wrapped around Dorian’s ankle and pulled him up. He yelled. Cassandra lunged and cut the branch. He dropped into the snow.

“Not in our circumstance,” said Solas, encased any branches that would come his way with ice. “We do not know how long we’ll spend within this forest. Would you like to be trapped within a wildfire?”

“The roots!” said Lavellan, smashed a flask of ice over his armour. “Freeze their roots!” It would be temporary, but it was better than nothing.

Dorian and Solas got to it, Varric joining with his elemental bolts, while Cassandra and Lavellan guarded them.

The sylvans froze in place, whipping their branches wildly. Other sylvans began to wake from the chaos.

“Run!” said Solas.

They ran deeper into the forest, froze the roots of sylvans giving chase, dodged branches that would come their way. Around them echoed the sounds of snapping wood. The Breach’s sickly green glow lit their way.

A few sylvans got hits, slapped into his arms or legs and bruised them to the Void and back, covered him in dull pain. Lavellan glowered at the floating hunk of rock that Corypheus was on. Bastard hadn’t even noticed them.

The Breach’s pull became stronger, the Veil stretching too much too fast. A faint, whining noise accompanied the snapping wood.

The ground beneath him shook, shifted.

Lavellan stumbled as the nearby tree was torn from the earth, sent hurtling towards the Breach. Cassandra caught him.

"Be wary," said Solas. "The initial opening of the Breach has blanketed the surroundings with powerful ambient magic. We should be safe from being drawn to the Breach's pull, but the same cannot be said for the forest."

"That's great," muttered Varric.

"Keep going," said Lavellan.

Everyone continued and dodged the sylvans while also minding the ground, every step sapping their stamina and leaving them huffed.

They couldn't reach Corypheus if they kept going like this. Never mind fighting him. They'd be too exhausted.

His eyes darted around the forest, looking for *something*. There had to be something.

He eyed the floating rock again.

If you couldn't pursue the prey...

You let it come to you.

"I need a spell that will amplify my voice," said Lavellan, almost tripped as another nearby tree was uprooted.

Solas glanced at him, frowning. They slowed their pace so Solas could wave his hand over Lavellan's mouth, the air shimmering. Dorian threw a barrier over them and Solas doubled it to repel any sylvan attacks.

Lavellan took a deep breath.

"You haven't changed at all, Corypheus," said Lavellan, his voice reverbing around the forest. "Always leaving the dirty work to others."

Corypheus turned his head, searched for him.

"So it seems the rattus has crawled out of the woodwork," said Corypheus. "I knew you would come. Show yourself."

"I'm not hiding. I've never hidden. You're the one who keeps skulking about, never showing your face. Too embarrassed after I've beaten you twice?"

The stream of light connecting the orb to the Breach fizzled away. Corypheus pushed off from the rock and hovered, scanned the forest.

"Your tongue will be the first thing I will cut," he snarled.

"You really think you can be a god with insults as weak as that? I've heard worse from the Maker and he *isn't even here*."

Corypheus roared and swept an indiscriminate beam of magic into the forest below him.

Lavellan ushered everyone back as the beam swept too close ahead of them. A few of the sylvans

shrieked as the beam caught and ignited them.

Oh no.

“Where are you, little rattus?” Corypheus roared, flying over the forest.

Lavellan signalled for the others to scatter, then looked over his shoulder at Corypheus. He eyed the orb in Corypheus’ hand.

He didn’t notice the sylvan nearby until its branch knocked into his side and sent him sprawling. The amulet barrier triggered.

“There you are.”

The ground beneath Lavellan shifted. He rolled away just as a cluster of red lyrium crystals burst upward. His companions cried out in alarm as the bursts of red lyrium continued.

Corypheus zipped towards him, shot blasts of magic.

Lavellan rolled away, any blasts deflecting off the barrier, and he scrambled up.

The impacts had displaced the snow on the ground and the winds were keeping the particles aloft, shrouding the area in a white haze. Where—

A shadow to his right. He lunged out of the way and avoided Corypheus as he swooped.

“Your disrespect has gone on for long enough,” said Corypheus, his silhouette flickering into view as his landing made a light gust of wind sweep past. The orb was sparking red through the fog.

“Then stop making it easy.” Lavellan shot his hand out, Anchor flaring—

A red blast of magic headed for him. He ducked.

Something hard slammed into his stomach. Fucking sylvans—

He rolled with the hit, his lungs spasming and his breaths stuttering as he fell onto the snow. His cheeks and the tips of his ears were beginning to sting from the cold.

Lavellan pushed himself up and gasped for breath. The amulet barrier triggered again.

Red light glimmered within the fog of white, aimed at him—

Corypheus let out a surprised grunt, the red light sputtering away. Lavellan heard creaking wood.

Red flashed again, followed by a sylvan’s shriek, its flailing form shining through the film of snow. Had it attacked Corypheus? So he didn’t have them under his control?

Corypheus pushed himself up and returned to flying. His departure sent another, stronger gust of wind ripping through the area and Lavellan raised his arm to shield his eyes from the whip of snow.

Damn it, Lavellan couldn’t connect with the orb this far from him.

The snow cleared from the strong gust. Corypheus spotted him and raised his hand, rained magic down into the forest.

Lavellan cursed and ran, wove between trees for cover. The blasts kicked up earth and snow.

Two arcs of lightning and an elemental bolt hit Corypheus at the same time, flung him back. He roared, turned and swept a beam behind him. The beam sliced through the tops of the trees. Lavellan sheathed his daggers, hurriedly unslung his bow, uncapped his quiver, and nocked an arrow.

He aimed at Corypheus' back.

"Come out, pests!" cried Corypheus, summoning a rain of magic.

Lavellan shot and ran the moment the arrow left.

His arrow sailed, buried into the exposed part of Corypheus' back.

Corypheus turned again, snarling, and swept his beam, but Lavellan was already gone. More bolts and spells hit Corypheus from all sides.

More of the forest caught on fire.

The Anchor and Breach pulsed again and the surge of pain drove Lavellan to his knees, his eyes watering.

Smoke began to thread through the forest. The fire's orange glow grew brighter. They couldn't stay here for too much longer.

Tiers of large magic circles flashed over Corypheus. The air shimmered, the Veil shrieked, and Corypheus was slammed down. His impact sent up a large plume of snow, the ground rumbling. Lavellan had to get there. He had to finish this. Had to finish him. Keep everybody safe.

He forced himself to stand, cradled his flaring hand close to him, rushed towards where Corypheus had fallen.

No sylvans stopped him. They must have been frightened away by the flames.

A snap echoed above him. A burning branch broke off from its tree and fell.

Lavellan cursed, lunged forward.

The branch fell on the ground where he'd been standing, kicked up a cloud of embers upon collision. Its heat licked through the coat of chill over his face.

Lavellan hurried.

"A pike shall hold your head before the gates of the Grand Cathedral, Seeker!" came Corypheus' taunt.

Cassandra's battle cry followed. "We shall see about that."

Lavellan arrived at a shallow crater that had been created by Corypheus' impact. Cassandra slashed at Corypheus, the others providing cover fire at the edges of the crater, but Corypheus had a barrier around him.

Corypheus swiped his claws at her.

She raised her shield, but Corypheus still flung her to the ground. Her barrier flickered away. He

aimed his hand at her, palm swirling with red light.

Lavellan opened a sunder above Corypheus and struck him still, the force of it eating at his barrier. Electric heat flared up Lavellan's arm, to his jaw, but he gritted his teeth through it.

"His back!" Lavellan managed to get out. "Lower back!"

Cassandra pushed herself up. Corypheus struggled against the sunder, his barrier shattering. She swerved around him, slashed her sword at his back—

The Anchor flickered with a spike of pain and the sunder closed prematurely.

Cassandra scored a slice at Corypheus' back, but he twisted away, struck.

Another barrier flashed around her, blocked the strike. He fired a beam instead and Cassandra raised her shield against it — Dirthamen's shield, its silver surface reflecting the red and orange from the magic and fires around them.

The beam hit the barrier-coated shield, pushed her back.

Lavellan breathed through his pain and ran at them, his daggers out. He eyed the orb in Corypheus' grip.

Corypheus glanced at him. The orb left his hand and hovered over his head, and he aimed that hand at Lavellan, red light swirling.

A barrier flashed around Lavellan, pure, powerful, resonating with something in him. A power that his soul had long been familiar with. During the rebellion when he and Solas had fought side by side.

Corypheus' red beam met the barrier, but it barely made a dent.

Lavellan closed the distance and struck at his back, cut deep into the tough skin.

"You dare?" Corypheus snarled, focused both beams of magic on him. Lavellan scrambled back.

Dorian summoned a field of electricity around Corypheus, and lightning struck relentlessly, drove Corypheus to his knees.

Lavellan and Cassandra regrouped, stood together.

The scene was too familiar. Smoke-clogged skies and an ache all over his body with Cassandra by his side.

"Don't you die on me," said Lavellan.

"Likewise."

Corypheus roared and fought against the lightning. "You shall be dealt with harshly, Tevinter. The Imperium suffers no traitors!"

"Your Imperium will never be mine, monster," Dorian spat.

Lavellan raised his hand at the orb hovering above Corypheus, the Anchor and orb flaring—

Corypheus sent a blast of magic at Dorian.

Solas put up a barrier around Dorian in time, but the impact still sent him flying.

“Sparkler!” cried Varric.

The lightning faded and Corypheus was freed. Damn it.

Cassandra and Lavellan rushed at him.

It was all too easy to fall into a rhythm with her. They gave Corypheus no openings, one covering for the other, with the occasional spell from the mages to keep them going or to deter Corypheus. If they were pests, then they were going to be annoying ones.

Still, Lavellan couldn't get the chance to establish a connection with the orb.

The Breach pulsed. He stumbled, his hand flaring.

Corypheus swiped his claws at him.

Cassandra came between them and deflected him with her shield, pulled Lavellan back. He shook his hand out and returned to the fight.

They whittled Corypheus down, the ranged attackers halting his attempts to summon magic, while Lavellan and Cassandra kept up their barrage of cuts. Solas maintained their barriers, again and again. Not even a second in which they'd be left susceptible.

Corypheus' strikes soon grew careless. His face twisted into a deeper snarl with every miss.

Just a little further!

“Enough!” Corypheus barked and knocked them all back with a burst of magic.

Lavellan crashed into the ground, his daggers flying out of his hands. He groaned, rolled onto his back and blinked up at the smoky sky in disorientation.

He slowly sat up, his head throbbing, vision swimming. His companions were all on the ground in various states of dazed.

Corypheus' eyes were glowing red, the orb sparking as it hovered between his hands.

Now.

Lavellan forced himself to stand. Smoke swirled in his lungs and the stale, acrid scent of Corypheus' magic twisted in his throat.

“No, I will not allow you to ruin this,” said Corypheus, forcing the orb into submission. It trembled violently. “I have walked the halls of the Golden City, crossed the ages.” A horrible shrieking noise came from the orb, emerald and crimson light swirling, battling.

Lavellan raised his hand, the Anchor flaring. He searched for the thread connecting the two, sought out its magical energy.

“Dumat!” cried Corypheus. “Ancient ones! I beseech you!”

The orb's energy brushed against Lavellan and he grabbed the thread, established the connection. The orb blazed with emerald light.

“If you exist— If you ever truly existed—” Corypheus held the orb in one hand, raised his other, magic-charged one at Lavellan. “Aid me now!”

Lavellan yanked.

The orb flew from Corypheus’ hand into Lavellan’s, slammed into the side of Corypheus’ face along the way.

It hovered above Lavellan’s hand, hummed, shrouded in a tranquil glow of green.

Corypheus fell to his knees.

It was time to end this.

Lavellan raised the orb at the Breach and a beam of green light shot into the emerald eye of it. The clouds swirled and the sky pulsed. Trees and rocks that had been suspended plummeted, the ground rumbling from their fall, the leaves from the trees shaking and dislodging their accumulated snow.

That gaping rip in the sky slowly stitched itself together and the orb’s glow dimmed.

The orb fell into his waiting hand instead of the ground this time.

His companions pushed themselves up. Lavellan met Solas’ gaze. Solas leaned heavily against his staff, fatigued, but he still shot Lavellan a small smile.

Lavellan held the orb close and shot Corypheus’ crumpled form a sharp look.

He’d had enough of this thing.

He approached Corypheus, transferred the orb to his right hand.

“It’s over,” said Lavellan, stopped in front of Corypheus. He aimed the Anchor at him. “You’ve lost.”

He opened a rift behind Corypheus and made sure it was incomplete, made sure the force of it would rip Corypheus apart.

Another surge of electric heat raced up his arm, worse than before. Fuck— Had he overworked it tonight?

The rift flickered. Lavellan flinched—

“Then I shall take you with me,” said Corypheus, shot his hand out and wrapped it around Lavellan’s throat.

“Inquisitor!”

He dragged Lavellan closer with him to the unfinished rift.

Shit, he’d be ripped apart too!

His companions sprinted towards them.

Lavellan reached for the dagger at his hip and grasped empty air.

Oh, fuck.

He dug his heels in, yanked at Corypheus' arm, but his grip and the rift's pull was too strong. Shit

Lavellan gritted his teeth and steeled himself, aimed his hand at the rift, *forced* it to open wider. His nerves shrilled. Lavellan screamed and kept going, opened it fully, the Fade waiting on the other side.

“Mahanon!”

Lavellan looked back over his shoulder, his heart jackrabbiting against his ribs.

Solas reached for him, panicked.

Lavellan clenched his jaw and rolled the orb towards Solas. He ignored it, kept racing towards Lavellan, hand outstretched. Lavellan reached back—

Corypheus pulled him harder.

They fell into the Fade.

The Anchor sputtered and another wave of pain forced Lavellan to close the rift. The last thing he saw were Solas' wide, crystalline eyes before they were replaced by the Fade's familiar realm and its shifting, emerald skies.

Corypheus held Lavellan up and threw him into a nearby fragment of wall.

Lavellan hastily grabbed at the Fade's energy and just managed to cushion his collision, but his head snapped too far forward and his chin slammed into his breastplate, sent a jarring shockwave throughout his skull.

The halla amulet fell out from under his shirt and dangled, its barrier flashing around him. His hand was still aflame with green and pain. He breathed through it sharply, tried to rise, but fell, the impact knocking the breath out of him.

“*Vergala?*” he asked, but their connection had grown too dim. He couldn't reach her through the Fade.

Corypheus snarled at Lavellan and raised his hands above his head, gathered a large ball of red magic between it.

“Wait,” said Lavellan, scrambled to sit up. Blight magic was still a branch of Void magic! “Wait, don't use your magic here—”

He roared and hurled it at Lavellan.

Lavellan raised a barrier on top of the amulet's.

The barrier and ball of magic collided. Fade and Void.

Repelled.

The ball of magic exploded; Lavellan's barriers shattered.

A powerful gust of wind from the aftermath ripped through them, knocked Corypheus back.

Lavellan was already down so he just shielded his face with his arm.

A soft, cracking sound reached his ears.

Lavellan's breath caught. He looked down at the source: the halla amulet from Clan Venalin. A web of glowing cracks steadily spread over its surface. He reached for it—

The amulet shattered. Its fragments fell onto the ground and he stared at them, eyes wide.

His hand flared once more and he cried out, clenched it as if he could stifle the pain. His eyes watered and a lump formed in his throat. He had to get out of here. The darkspawn were still attacking Skyhold. He had to get back home. No, he had to take care of Corypheus first. Protect everyone— He had to—

Corypheus laughed as he pushed himself up. “So this is the Inquisitor's kindness that the others have proclaimed! How kind of you to deliver me to the Golden City's doorsteps!”

Lavellan gnashed his teeth, glowered at him. “Acting all triumphant even though you were whining like an infant after its parents earlier.”

His expression darkened and he made his way towards Lavellan.

Lavellan tried to push himself back up, but he could barely think past the sharp throbbing of his hand. He instinctively reached into his coat for the grounding stone.

It wasn't there.

His throat seized. No, where...? He searched his other inner pockets. Not there, not there, not there either— Where?

His breaths trembled.

The earring?

He reached into the earring's pocket.

It was empty.

His breaths started shallowing, his gaze darting frantically. Had he lost them? Where were they? Where?

Something golden glinted on the ground ahead of him.

Corypheus stopped beside it.

“What's this?” asked Corypheus, picked it up with his claws and examined it. Lavellan's heart stopped. “A little trinket?”

Lavellan should have kept his face neutral, should have pretended not to care so that Corypheus would toss it aside and he could retrieve it later.

And yet, “Give it back,” Lavellan couldn't help but say, voice cracking from desperation.

Corypheus wrapped his hand around it. “You have taken everything that should have been mine. A little thief, a gnat. So I will take everything you hold dear, and I will destroy them.” He looked at Lavellan. “And you will watch.”

He crushed the earring.

The snap of it was soft, but it echoed like a thunderclap in Lavellan's ears.

His vision tunnelled, his heart encasing in ice and lodging at the base of his throat. Blood and ringing roared in his ears.

Corypheus opened his hand, golden and violet shards raining down from it.

Lavellan stared at the pieces, paralysed.

He made his way towards Lavellan, stepped over the shards. "I will raze your precious Inquisition, and I will make your fortress the seat of my power. The path to it will be lined with pikes holding the heads of everyone you've ever cherished. I will hang the bodies of your comrades over the walls of the battlements." He yanked Lavellan up by the hair and Lavellan grimaced, couldn't send any commands to his limbs. Couldn't *move*. Couldn't do anything besides tremble. No, he had to move. He had to keep everyone back home safe. "And you will watch it all. You will know that your pretending has failed them."

Corypheus wrapped his hand around Lavellan's throat once more and lifted him. Lavellan struggled, clawed at Corypheus' arm, gasped for breath. He had to protect—

"I will gather every single rattus and hang their ears as my trophy." He squeezed. Lavellan wheezed, his hearing muffling. *Protect, protect, keep safe*. "And you. Your head will be on my throne."

He couldn't let Corypheus leave. He couldn't let Corypheus reach the Black City. He had to protect everyone. He had to keep them safe.

He had to keep them safe.

Keep them safe.

His darkening vision fell on the Black City hovering in the distance.

He had to keep them safe.

He had to stop the problem at its source.

A blanket of clarity settled over his screaming thoughts.

Yes, stop it at the source. He could do it. No more poison.

All of his pain dulled as the new sense of purpose echoed in his mind until it was all he could hear.

Keep everyone safe.

The Fade's energy hummed around him.

Lavellan tightened his grip on Corypheus' arm, gathered the Fade's energy around his hand, more and more, gripped harder and harder.

Corypheus cried out but it sounded dim.

Lavellan snapped his arm.

He dropped Lavellan and Lavellan landed softly, stood, shadows gathering around his ankles. Golden light flooded into his hand.

Corypheus lunged for him. "You—!"

Lavellan slammed his hand into Corypheus' chest and spilled golden light into it, threw him onto the ground.

Keep everyone safe.

Corypheus tried to rise.

Lavellan stomped down on Corypheus' chest and shoved him back, shaped the Fade into a crushing pressure to keep him down. He looked at Lavellan, eyes wide.

"What are you?" Corypheus demanded.

"Did you know," Lavellan said, tone even, "that memories can be extracted with Fade magic too? They only used blood magic because it was faster, and it left the host's mind largely intact if done properly. Ethics and all."

He lifted his foot, the Fade keeping Corypheus in place, and crouched beside Corypheus' head. He grabbed it. Red lyrium pressed into his palm.

"Unfortunately, we're in the Fade. Blood and Fade don't mix well." He reached into Corypheus' mind, his hand flaring gold, the darkness around him growing. "And it would be a shame to not use the resources that are already abundant."

Corypheus' eyes rolled to the back of his head and he screamed.

Lavellan stared him down as the knowledge flowed into him.

Keep everyone safe.

"I'll be merciful," said Lavellan. "You want to see your precious Black City so much? I'll take you there. You can see it one last time."

His screams heightened.

"You won't need anything more than your eyes to see though, right?"

Keep everyone safe.

Chapter End Notes

I'm here to put the dragon in ~~how to train your~~-- ah shit wrong franchise

Guys come get ur inquisitor. This old man's back is about to give from how much he shoulders

(if anyone's worried about the fate of our two sad elves, just know that i don't do tragic endings if they contradict the themes i've set up <3 that is all, thank)

Unrelated but my mental health has uh. It's been Bad™ again lately lmao. But I read back thru all of the nice comments you guys have left and they cheered me up quite a bit so thanks guys. Yall are champs and so very sweet. Hope you all have a nice few weeks.

No wings to glide

Chapter Notes

Solas POV yall let's goo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

no faith to soar

The Breach closed above them, left them in the orange haze of the forest fires. Solas stared at where the rift had been, hand still outstretched, trees and debris falling in the wake of the Breach's closure.

The wind howled. The earth shook.

Solas ignored all of the aches flaring throughout his body and turned on his heel, hobbled towards the orb, and fell to his knees beside it. He grabbed it, metallic stone pressing into his palms, its weight and pattern familiar, the power within more so. His.

And what good had it done?

"Solas?" asked Cassandra, her voice and expression still set in the same shock as the others'.

There was no time. They must retrieve Lavellan.

He clenched his jaw and resonated with the magic that the orb had accumulated. Green light flooded the spaces of the patterns and the orb hovered between his hands. Lightning sparked.

Solas reached into its reservoir of energy and the orb's power flooded into him, the air growing heavy with ambient magic. He weathered the surge of it, kept his focus so that the inundation would not sweep him away. His mana stores repleted and his soul sang. A homecoming. He closed his eyes, allowed himself a brief moment of contentment before he refocused on the task at hand.

Once everything settled, he reached for the seams within the fabric of the Veil.

"What are you doing?" asked Dorian.

"Getting him back," said Solas through gritted teeth, arraying his power into a semblance of cooperative. There was still too much, coiling about like an eager pup.

The space in front of him rippled with green. A shrill shriek filled the air and the Veil trembled, resisted, an unnatural gust of wind swirling around them. But the Veil was his creation. He could make it obey.

"Stop!" cried Dorian, tried to reach for Solas, but the swirling winds intensified and prevented him from nearing. "Solas, stop!"

Power continued flooding into him, into the rip.

Too much, too much—

But he must. Lavellan was alone with Corypheus and he was injured and in pain—

The air screamed, filling with the scent of stale lightning.

“Solas! You’ll make another Breach, stop!”

Solas faltered. Another Breach. A stronger Breach. Made by one who knew how to use the extent of the orb’s powers. He would truly doom the world then.

The rip grew larger.

Varric raised his arms, placating. “We’ll get him back, Chuckles. Okay? We’ll get him back, but not like this.”

But Lavellan...

Solas scrunched his eyes shut.

I am sorry, vhenan. Wait for me for a while longer.

Slowly, he eased his grip on the Veil.

The half-formed rift trembled, then snapped shut. The power he’d been feeding into it recoiled into him and he staggered.

“Easy there,” said Dorian and caught him. Solas steadied himself, gripped the orb so tight that his nails scraped against it and caught on its grooves.

The smoke around them thickened, the fires spreading.

“We have to go before we get trapped here,” said Varric. He’d retrieved Lavellan’s daggers, now holding them in both hands. The sight of them sent a hollow pang through Solas.

“And we need to return to Skyhold and assist the others,” said Cassandra.

“That’s quite the trip, Seeker.”

“Which is why we have to leave now.”

It was logical, the correct course of action, the rational path, but how could he leave Lavellan in the Fade? Spirit of Change or not—

No. He must believe that Lavellan could handle Corypheus. If Lavellan were here, he would also prioritise returning to the Skyhold to aid the others. Although, the problem of returning in a timely manner remained.

He looked at the orb. Perhaps... It had enough power for a transformation or two. They’d crossed the distance earlier with a dragon, and while there was no contesting the creature, a large wolf could still get them to their destination faster than if they were on foot. But was it worth the risk? It could arouse suspicion. Then again, it wasn’t as if he had any better alternatives. A wolf was the form he was most familiar with and there was little time to experiment with other forms.

“I believe I can get us back,” said Solas, placing his staff on the ground. “Please allow me some room.”

The others backed away, eyed him curiously as the emerald light of his magic coated him, the orb

once again glowing as he tapped into it for augmentation. He closed his eyes and allowed his power to sweep through his body.

It'd been a while since he'd shapeshifted. The process took longer than he was accustomed to, as inexperienced as he was with the Veil's interference during it, and it left him sore and aching once the transformation was complete. He opened his eyes, now looking down at the others.

They gawked at him.

Solas nudged the orb and staff on the ground using his snout towards Cassandra. She gingerly retrieved them, held the orb as if it would combust in her hands. He lowered himself and projected his voice.

"On my back," he said.

"Still not the weirdest thing to have happened to me," muttered Varric and was the first to climb onto Solas' back, followed by Cassandra. Dorian shot him a small frown as he passed. Thankfully, he asked no questions, but Solas would likely face them later.

With everyone on board, he rose, took a few experimental steps forward to reacquaint himself with this lupine body and to acclimate to everyone's added weight. Once he was steady on his feet, he worked his way up to a sprint and bounded through the forest, took the safest path. As safe as they could be. The wildfire had worsened, the air a haze of shimmering orange.

"Dorian," said Solas, needn't say anything more as Dorian cast a barrier around them, warding the smoke and heat away.

"Ahead!" warned Varric.

Solas stopped in time to avoid a branch that fell ahead of them and blocked their way. He swerved onto another path, doubled his speed, and raced through.

Lavellan had mentioned that he'd had access to his magic whenever he was dreaming, so Solas could only surmise that being physically present in the Fade would grant even greater control. He would be alright. Perhaps he'd already defeated Corypheus and was searching for a way back. Perhaps he was waiting for the Anchor to stabilise before opening a rift. He would be alright. He was alright.

They escaped the forest. Solas kicked up snow as he ran, speckles of white against his dark fur.

"I didn't know you could shapeshift," said Dorian over the howling wind.

He suppressed the temptation to throw Dorian off his back. *"You never asked."*

"Yes, I'm starting to see that I should have asked about many more things."

Solas pretended he hadn't heard.

Upon reaching the frozen river, he pulled at the Veil and created a platform above the ice that he could run on. The wind carried the faint sounds of fighting from beyond Skyhold's walls.

Everyone alighted after they reached the banks. Solas shifted back into an elf, took care to revert to his shorter height, and stumbled after the transformation. His bones ached. Solas stifled his grimace. Cassandra passed him the orb and staff, a question shimmering in her eyes along with a new flash of suspicion. He would have to construct a proper excuse later, but there were more

pressing concerns for now.

They rushed back through the tunnels in a cold and empty silence, as though Lavellan had taken all the fullness with him.

The sounds of the fighting grew louder as they reached the stairs and raced up it to the bailey doors. They readied their weapons and raised their masks. Cassandra threw open the doors back into the bailey.

Corpses of the darkspawn and Inquisition soldiers alike littered the area, the clash of metal ringing in the air. Cassandra rushed ahead while Solas, Dorian and Varric retreated to opportune areas.

The orb was still augmenting his strength, but Solas tempered it, breathed through its rush. Losing control of it now would do nobody good.

He shaped the Veil into a vortex and dragged the nearest darkspawn into a cluster, staggered them with its force. Dorian slammed his staff down and summoned a field of electricity around that cluster. The darkspawn thrashed, then collapsed.

Cassandra darted away from a hurlock's war hammer. Solas coated her in a barrier and quickened her movements. She stumbled on her next step.

"Fenedhis," he hissed. Had he put too much?

The hurlock swung its hammer down during her stumble.

Solas snapped the Veil into the hurlock and staggered it. Cassandra recovered and dodged the hammer, slipped her sword into its neck.

A distant war horn echoed in the night.

"Reinforcements!" cried an archer on the battlements and it repeated like a ripple through the Inquisition soldiers.

"Reinforcements?"

"Yeah! Ferelden!"

Renewed, the soldiers fought harder.

A few of the darkspawn tore through the soldiers guarding the battlements and flooded up the stairs. Alarmed cries came from the archers. Solas Fade-stepped towards the battlements and worked with the soldiers to fell the infiltrating waves of darkspawn with vicious streaks of lightning.

The darkspawn may be unrelenting and seemingly endless, but Solas had fought worse creatures for centuries. He would not be cowed.

During a reprieve, he looked out over the battlements. The darkspawn army had been whittled down significantly, the remaining now scrambling to retreat. Perhaps their tether to Corypheus had weakened upon his banishment to the Fade, or perhaps Lavellan had already defeated him. Solas could only hope for the latter.

But the darkspawn had nowhere left to go. The Fereldan cavalry was awaiting at the flanks and closing in, slaughtering any darkspawn attempting to escape.

Solas tightened his grip on his staff and returned to defending the battlements.

The darkspawn numbers continued to decline as the minutes passed. Victory was on the horizon. But Solas didn't rest.

This did not feel like a victory.

They soon eliminated the last of the darkspawn within Skyhold's walls. Some soldiers followed any retreating darkspawn while the cavalry took care of the other stragglers.

Upon what could be construed as the battle's conclusion, a few cries of triumph erupted from the bailey. The others quickly joined, their cheers heightening to a roaring chorus, but Solas only felt heavier with each rejuvenated voice. All of these soldiers had fought for the Inquisition, for Lavellan.

And Solas had returned without their light.

Most of the inner circle gravitated towards one another in the lower bailey, sharing a tired grin or a relieved sigh. Solas took a composing breath and made his way down towards them, his steps leaden. Cassandra, Varric, and Dorian joined him, shrouded in the same silence that had plagued them since Lavellan's disappearance.

The Iron Bull and Cullen were leaning against each other, the light of Vivienne's spirit sword dissipating as she caught Leliana when she stumbled. Sera arrived on Cole's back, her expression strained and posture awkward, as though she were riding a bronto that could buck her off at any moment. Ellana and Abelas hobbled towards them, supporting one another.

Cullen spotted their approach, his expression lighting up in relief. "We saw the Breach close. Thank the Maker you've..." He hesitated, frowned as he scanned their group.

Vivienne eyed the orb in Solas' hand. "Is that...?" she started.

"The orb Corypheus was wielding," confirmed Solas.

Bull perked up. "So you got him! Ha! Fuck, we did it. He's really gone?" He took in their silence, his eye flicking towards Dorian, then Solas. His grin faded. "Hey... where's Mercy?"

The words stuck to the walls of Solas' throat.

"Where is he?" Ellana asked, tone hard but strained.

Solas gripped the orb tighter, bowed his head.

"No, don't you get droopy on me," said Sera, her voice tightening. "Hey, where's he?"

"He's gone?" asked Cole, sounding small.

The others stirred.

"We do not know," Solas hurried to amend before they could cause a scene. "He— He attempted to defeat Corypheus by tearing him apart using a rift, but his mark has been aggrieved by the Breach. Opening the rift must have caused him pain. He faltered for just a single second."

"Corypheus grabbed him," said Dorian. "It forced Mahanon to open a passage into the Fade and Corypheus dragged him into it. The passage closed before we could follow."

“You just left him there?” asked Bull, volume raising.

“Does it look like we have the Anchor to you?” Dorian snapped.

Sera pointed emphatically at the orb. “You got that, don’t you?”

“You think I did not try?” Solas asked, couldn’t stop his calm from unspooling through his fingers. “I would have opened a new Breach had I continued!”

“How do we retrieve him?” Vivienne asked, steely yet boasting the calm that Solas wished he had.

“The orb, but it is still unstable due to Corypheus’ poor use.” He paused for a moment to compose himself. “Only time can stabilise it.”

“How long?”

“I am not certain.”

Everyone shared lost and heavy looks. Lavellan’s raven circled over them, then swooped, perched on the end of Solas’ staff. She tilted her head at the orb, then looked at Solas.

“Lavellan?” she cawed. Her feathers ruffled. “Lavellan?”

Solas shook his head. “I am sorry. He is lost in the Fade.”

She cawed shrilly and flapped her wings. Solas lowered his gaze, could only murmur another apology. She took off once more and he lost sight of her against the dark sky. His heart twisted.

“He returned from the Fade twice,” said Blackwall. “Who’s to say he can’t do it again?”

“So we wait?” asked Dorian. “That’s absurd! He’s stuck with Corypheus!”

“We aren’t left with many choices, are we?”

Cullen sheathed his sword and sighed. “For now, we...” He looked around the bailey, at the corpses and injured soldiers and medics rushing to and fro. “We clean house.”

“Commander!” called a soldier, rushed towards them. “Commander! We’ve apprehended the traitor who opened the portcullis!”

Cullen snapped to attention. “Who?”

“It’s the Tevinter magister. Alexius.”

Solas and Dorian accompanied Cullen to the cells. Dorian cursed in Tevene the entire way, but Solas frowned. This made little sense. Alexius had never worked for Corypheus out of loyalty. The Venatori had been a means to an end for him. He already had a place in the Inquisition, had his apprentices, had colleagues who’d eventually grown receptive to him. Why would he do this now? Solas had known many scheming souls in his lifetime, and Alexius had never presented any signs of having a hidden agenda during his time here.

No, there must be more to the story.

They entered the dungeons. The soldier guarding one of the cells saluted at their arrival.

“Is he in there?” asked Cullen.

“Yes, Commander.”

They approached the cell. Solas’ eyes widened.

Alexius was slumped against the wall, chained, covered in numerous wounds with blood matted against the side of his face. Likely from the cut on his forehead.

“We found him unconscious by the mechanisms,” reported the soldier. “There were two dead Inquisition soldiers with him. He must have slain them.”

A bold claim. “Were you there to see it?” asked Solas.

“Er, no. But it’s easy to infer what he’d done.”

It was still quite the leap regardless. And— “He is severely injured,” Solas said. “Retrieve a healer at once.”

“But he—”

“This is not how the Inquisitor would wish for anyone within this castle’s walls to be treated. Perceived traitor or not. Retrieve a healer.”

The soldier looked at Cullen.

Cullen sighed and nodded tiredly. The soldier scurried away.

“I apologise for stepping in,” said Solas once the soldier had gone.

“No, it’s— You’re right. The Inquisitor would have done the same.” He glanced at Solas. “You said perceived traitor. You do not believe he did it?”

“I believe there is more to the story. I will not vilify him unfairly. Do you have the keys? I could help heal him while the healer is underway.”

“Is that a good idea?” Regardless, he passed Solas the keys.

Solas took them. “You and Dorian are present.”

He unlocked the cell and knelt beside Alexius, hovered a sweeping hand over him to assess the extent of his injuries. Quite severe. He frowned and inspected the ambient magic still faintly clinging to Alexius. Traces of Tevinter magic.

“Dorian,” Solas called, “could you assist me, please?”

“What is it?” He walked into the cell and knelt beside Solas.

“I sense Tevinter magic, but I cannot differentiate whether it is externally or internally sourced.”

Dorian held up a glowing hand. “Let me see...” While he was examining, Solas set to closing the open wounds he could see. Dorian frowned. “It’s quite faint. But it’s external, I believe.”

“And yet, he was the only Tevinter within the vicinity.” He glanced at Dorian. “Supposedly.”

Dorian put his hand to his mouth in thought. “Could there have been Venatori infiltrators?”

“Commander,” said Solas, “it may be worth consulting the backgrounds of the soldiers that were found with Alexius.”

The soldier returned with the healer. Solas and Dorian stepped back while Cullen relayed the new orders to the soldier.

“We can find out more once the magister wakes up,” said Cullen.

“If he wakes up,” murmured Dorian, gaze downcast and shoulders slumped.

News of the Inquisitor’s disappearance soured the soldiers’ triumph and a sullen cloud befell everybody as they cleaned up the aftermath. The Fereldan forces helped make pits for the darkspawn bodies and the mages burned them, while the fallen Inquisition soldiers were carted away and wrapped, prepared for burials or cremation.

Orlesian forces arrived just after dawn and helped with the cleaning up, which allowed the remainder of the Inquisition to rest. For once, the Orlesians and Fereldans did not set upon each other like rabid dogs.

Solas and the inner circle gathered in the War Room, staring at the orb on the table.

“So what is this orb, really?” asked Josephine, opening the conversation that nobody knew how to traverse. Least of all Solas. Everybody looked at him, their gazes heavy. He kept his eyes on the orb. “We must know what we are dealing with if we are to work with it.”

“The magisters of old apparently carried similar devices,” said Dorian. “I’d assumed that’s what it was, but if there’s anything I’ve learned while I was here, it’s that Tevinter *borrowed* many of their inventions from the ancient elves.”

Solas put his hands behind his back, gripped his wrist.

“Solas?” asked Josephine gently. “Would you be able to enlighten us?”

Should he reveal the orb’s true nature? Many of them were astute. They could make the correct assumptions, could connect it all back to Solas. They would realise that he was at the root of their suffering. That he’d been responsible for the loss of so many lives, that he’d been responsible for cataclysmic event after cataclysmic event due to his follies, his hubris, his wrath. They would realise that he was why Lavellan had been suffering. *Was* suffering. Why Lavellan had gone missing.

They would realise that he’d been lying about everything.

He closed his eyes and let out a heavy breath.

But he could not retrieve Lavellan alone. He did not know how to accelerate the orb’s stabilisation, if it could even be achieved. He did not know how long it would take to stabilise.

Solas would deal with the consequences later. Since planning every step of his actions or throwing caution to the wind had both yielded catastrophic results, there truly was no difference now.

No, that wasn't quite true. He'd risked telling Lavellan the truth, and he'd accepted Solas regardless. Granted, he'd already known, and there had been turbulent disagreements along the way, but he'd trusted Solas in return. Perhaps Solas could bear to trust, one more time, if it meant retrieving the man who felt like home. He would not lose Lavellan again.

"Solas?" asked Josephine again. Had he been paralysed in silence?

"This is a focus," said Solas. "An ancient elven device made to channel and augment the power of the elven gods."

"Oh, shit," murmured Bull.

Morrigan frowned. "This device was made for the gods only, then, I presume."

"Yes."

"Then comes the question of which god owns it."

"It would have no bearing either way," said Solas. "All of the foci function similarly. For now, our main concern is determining a way to stabilise it so that we can use it to open a safe passage into the Fade."

"Wouldn't we need the Anchor for that?" asked Dorian. "It was the whole reason why Corypheus attacked Haven."

"Because Corypheus didn't possess the skill to manipulate the orb effectively. He could only use it at its highest level of strength, which could create a Breach."

Morrigan eyed him. "And you would claim to be able to use it effectively?"

Solas gave her a level look. "I understand it somewhat better than he, yes. Perhaps it will be enough to open a small passage."

"And how have you come to know an instrument that only the gods could wield?"

"They were not the only ones who could wield them. Simply that they had hoarded the method of its creation to themselves."

A mischievous smile with a matching glint in violet eyes flashed through Solas' mind. "*Would you like a focus?*"

Solas squashed the memory and put it aside.

"There's a spell that the Keeper taught me," said Ellana. "We use it whenever we have to cleanse recovered artefacts that are full of malign ambient magic."

Vivienne hummed. "Yes, I believe we have a similar spell taught within the Circles. Though the method relied mostly on suppression."

"Same with ours. It's likely similar then."

"I..." started Morrigan, before she paused, looked away. "I learned a spell from my mother. 'Tis one reliant on distribution instead."

“Could the two be mixed?” asked Dorian.

“Possibly,” said Solas. “We could analyse the differences and perhaps find a way to combine them.”

“We will leave that for later,” said Josephine. “We... have had a harrowing night. We should all get some needed rest. Remember to monitor your conditions for any symptoms of the Taint.”

The others murmured in agreement and they slowly left the War Room.

Abelas looked at Solas, hesitated, then walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“He is skilled,” said Abelas. “I am certain he is alright. Vergala would have made a larger commotion if something had happened to him.”

Abelas’ grip was tight. Perhaps the reassurance was for himself too.

“Ma serannas,” said Solas. “Get some rest, Abelas.”

Abelas nodded once more and walked away, tapped Ellana on the way as she looked to be lost in thought. She blinked slowly, coming out of her stupor. Abelas murmured something. She rubbed her eyes, shot Solas an exhausted look.

“We will get him back,” Solas reassured.

She could only nod hollowly and followed Abelas out the door.

Only Dorian remained.

Solas retrieved the orb. Were his hands trembling from fatigue or apprehension?

Dorian kept his gaze on the window.

“I asked Mahanon to tell me his favourite elven stories,” started Dorian. “I wanted to learn more about his culture, you see? Especially after that incident at the Dales. I was an ass. Rightfully yelled at. I wanted to try. To do better. I was quite surprised when his stories mostly revolved around the trickster god. What was his name?” Dorian met his gaze. “Fen’Harel?”

“Get to it.”

“The Dread Wolf, as he’s known,” Dorian continued, ignoring him. “We had a silly theory, one you knew and loudly disapproved of. That the Inquisitor was this Dread Wolf. But perhaps we had the wrong man.”

Dorian’s gaze hardened.

“Tell me something, Solas. Who came first, and who is true? The man or the wolf?”

They stared at one another.

Then, Solas sighed. ““Are you Fen’Harel?” would have sufficed.”

“*You’re* lecturing me about being more concise?”

Solas walked around the table and headed for the door. He would like some sleep. He could also investigate Lavellan’s whereabouts in the Fade while dreaming.

“The man came first,” said Solas, not looking at Dorian. “And he has always been truer than he would have liked to be.” He reached the door, finally looked back at Dorian, whose eyes were wide. “Why the surprise?”

“I... didn’t expect you to admit it. I was quite ready to unleash an investigation.”

“I am tired.” He smiled dryly. “Do not breathe a word of this to anybody.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A request. The chaos of it will only impede the process of retrieving Mahanon.”

“Does he know? About you?”

Lavellan knew far more than any of them thought.

“He does,” Solas said and opened the door, stepped out. “Good day.”

Chapter End Notes

And now you know why I started writing Solas POVs for tapestry. It was PRACTICE

Dorian: *prepared this entire mini speech to confront solas*

Solas, renowned for his own mini speeches: you talk too much

Dorian: bitch

Guys, guys, [look at the art](#) Slepil did look at it look it's so cute im dying it's so cute ;-;
thank you very much

In any case, happy holidays! Last update for the year (wow, what the hell). Have a lovely rest of the year <3

Without the guide

Chapter Notes

hello hello!! we are now in. 2022.

yeah idk who let that happen

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

morn nevermore

The bedchamber was empty. Cold. It was day, yet the light couldn't reach him.

It still felt like night.

Solas looked towards the couch and expected to find a raven cloak draped over its arm, looked towards the table and expected to find disordered papers waiting to be stacked in threes. A pile for the finished paperwork, another for the unfinished, another for the enjoyable reads.

But no. The arm was bare and the papers were still in one stack. The colours in the forest mural appeared dull. The fireplace was swept clean.

He stood in the middle of the room, the orb heavy in his hand.

Quiet.

He placed the orb on the couch and a wry smile pulled at his lips at the absurdity of this situation. An instrument that had caused unimaginable destruction, an instrument containing the fragments of a Titan's heart, was resting on the couch. Lavellan would laugh.

Nobody laughed.

Solas slipped into the bathroom and peeled himself out of his armour and robes, revealed the raw wounds he hadn't realised he'd acquired. No Taint, he was certain. He'd have felt its presence otherwise.

He washed himself quickly, healed and dressed his wounds, then grabbed a fresh tunic from the closet, gaze briefly flicking towards Lavellan's golden uniform and Dalish scarf already hung on the back of the closet door. Had Lavellan even realised he'd hung them? Was it a sign of assured victory or a promise to himself that he'd return to wear it again the day after the battle?

Whatever the answer may be, Lavellan had planned to return.

Solas glanced at the mural.

"I want to live."

Lavellan had planned to return. And whatever he put his mind to, he would accomplish. He would stay alive. He would come back, or he would survive long enough for them to retrieve him.

Solas gingerly grabbed the Dalish scarf and wrapped it around his neck, then slipped into bed, surrounded by Lavellan's scent.

He dreamt and searched the Fade but could find no signs of Lavellan.

Solas woke up in the late afternoon, his body aching, the emptiness of the room having staled in the air and souring his lungs whenever he breathed. No warmth beside him. No shuffling of papers from Lavellan attending to paperwork early. No groggy, murmured greetings of good morning.

He forced himself to rise, his body weighed down by fatigue and the staleness that had descended upon the room. He managed to swing his legs over the bed but couldn't bring himself to stand.

Rise, he told himself. *You must rise. One more time.*

Solas closed his eyes and bowed his head. There was a chill in his bones, a kind he was sure he hadn't felt before, yet it seeped far too readily into his marrows for it to be a stranger. As though Lavellan's absence were a familiar discomfort.

Ah. Because it *was* familiar. Because he'd already lost Lavellan before and he simply couldn't recall.

Solas pushed himself up, but put too much force into it and staggered once his injuries flared with a sharp ache. He caught himself, then resecured the scarf around himself, untied the wolves from his staff and placed them in his inner pockets, retrieved the orb on the couch, and left the room.

There was research to be done.

"I couldn't find him," said Ellana upon commencement of his meeting with her and Morrigan in one of Skyhold's research rooms.

"Neither could I," said Solas. He placed the orb on the table, and they stared at it. "I have questioned the denizens of the Fade, but none have seen a physical spi—" He stopped himself in time, remembering that Morrigan was present. He must be careful to not allow his fatigue to betray any of Lavellan's secrets.

"A physical spirit of Change, yes," said Morrigan. "He has told me. Although, you likely know more than I. Nonetheless, I know enough."

"Right," said Ellana, massaging the back of her neck. "Right, that at least makes this a little easier. I also consulted the spirit of Knowledge that Hanon and I had spoken to. I asked about how to meld spells together and Knowledge told me of a few avenues that we could try."

"Then let us get started," said Solas.

They worked well into the night and finished the prototype stabilising spell. It could be tested tomorrow. For now, however, their exhaustion was hindering their ability to cast properly or think

straight.

Solas retreated to bed but he was far too restless to sleep despite his fatigue. But he must keep searching the Fade. He sat up against the headboard and pressed the heel of his palm against his eyes.

Quiet.

He lit the fireplace so he could hear the crackle of the fire. It had always been a comforting sound.

But even that sounded unsettling in the empty room.

On the morning of the second day, the advisors called for a meeting with the inner circle. Everyone gathered in the room, solemn, each of them looking as haggard and sleepless as the other. The advisors had likely foregone most of their sleep to attend to their duties as well.

“I have mitigated the rumours regarding the Inquisitor’s disappearance,” said Leliana. “For now, the widely known information is that he’s sustained injuries that requires him to remain in bed for recovery.”

It was for the best. Lest they prematurely make a martyr out of him and use his name as a political tool.

“We’re still clearing the darkspawn corpses as well,” said Cullen. “The lands leading to Skyhold have withered, unfortunately.”

“Were there casualties in neighbouring settlements?” asked Cassandra.

“Some. Those we could not warn in time.”

“Shit,” whispered Varric.

“We have also unfortunately received reports of soldiers who have been infected with the Taint,” said Josephine and the others cursed beneath their breaths, shook their heads, or slumped in resignation. “Some decided to join the Grey Wardens for a chance to prolong their lives. Some have... requested for a merciful passing.”

Solas closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“We should arrange a ceremony to honour those we’ve lost,” said Blackwall.

Josephine nodded. “We’ve suggested it, but many have expressed their wishes to wait for the Inquisitor.”

Everyone quieted.

“For now,” Leliana said softly, “we will proceed with any funerary rites.”

“How’s it going with looking for Mercy?” asked Bull.

Solas shared a look with Morrigan and Ellana.

“We have a prototype spell,” said Solas. “All that remains is to apply it and hope it will succeed. Otherwise, we will continue with our research.”

Past experiences have told him that most devised spells never worked on the first attempt, but Solas had always been a fool who would hope for too much.

“Ah, Solas,” said Leliana, “regarding your request to determine the background of the two soldiers who were found with Alexius, I found something peculiar.”

“I imagined you would. What has happened?”

“Nobody recognises the two soldiers. There are no records of them at all.”

Bull grunted. “Infiltrators, then. Spies would still have records. They wouldn’t be good spies otherwise.”

“The last of those still loyal to Corypheus, likely,” said Dorian. “They would have had plenty of opportunities to sneak in while we were evacuating the neighbouring towns.”

“So was Alexius assisting them or hindering them?” asked Varric.

“Why would he be injured then?”

“To leave no witnesses?”

“I suppose we’ll find out if he wakes up. He’s still unconscious from his injuries.” Dorian shook his head. “Either way, what’s done is done.”

They continued discussing the state of Skyhold and its inhabitants, the remaining tasks to undertake and everyone’s roles, before they adjourned the meeting. Solas, Ellana, and Morrigan returned to their research and they tested the prototype spell.

Unsuccessful.

The skies shifted above Solas as he roamed the Fade’s many roads, to no avail.

Where are you, vhenan?

“It has been three days,” said Solas, braced his arms against the table. “If he has not returned to us yet, then he likely requires assistance.” Lavellan was in a vulnerable state, and perhaps his battle with Corypheus had placed him in a dangerous position. There were plenty of opportunistic spirits in the Fade.

“Maybe the Anchor hurts too much to open a passage?” asked Ellana.

Solas clenched his jaw. “Possibly.”

Lavellan had strained the mark again during the battle. What if he'd accelerated the process of its damage? What if he was dying from it? What if—

“Solas,” said Ellana and his head snapped up. Her gaze softened. “We’ll find him.”

He could only nod.

They devised another spell by the evening and attempted it.

Another failure.

Solas returned to his room, the one above the garden, and pulled out all of the research notes and books he'd hidden away, scoured them for ideas. For *anything*.

“Distribution and suppression,” he mumbled to himself, flipped through his papers. In his thousands of years of living, he'd devised many spells, simple and reality-altering alike, so *why* was it so difficult to accomplish a simple spell of stabilisation? Granted, the object requiring stability was anything but simple, but the mechanism should remain unchanged. It would simply require more power. He'd retrieved a good majority of it from the orb. And if they still required more power, then...

He wasn't a practitioner of blood magic as it'd always left him feeling ill, but if need be...

But there were surely still other alternatives.

Think! You may as well put your overthinking into good use.

Solas sat on the floor and perused through his research, burned through his candles until daylight streamed in through the windows, but he was still no closer to a solution. He slumped against the wall and knocked his head back into it, surrounded by a sea of papers.

Ellana wrung her fingers, dark swipes of shadows beneath her eyes. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t able to sleep to search for him.”

Solas shook his head, likely appearing similar to her. “Neither could I.”

Morrigan placed all their notes over the table. Her voice was uncharacteristically gentle when she said, “Another attempt, then.”

To think that he would be at the mercy of her pity one day.

The next spell was another failure.

Solas returned to his and Lavellan's room this time and lit the fireplace with a sharp wave of his hand. He collapsed on the couch, placed the orb aside, buried his head in his hands.

The fireplace roared, brilliant, perhaps even too bright and too hot, but Solas could still feel the chill like a shackle around his heart. This unknown yet familiar chill from an absent sun.

How had Solas ever weathered this? *Twice?*

(He hadn't.)

And why, even now, was he hoping for a familiar presence to settle beside him, hand firm but grounding on his back, violet eyes kind and patient? Solas had convinced himself that he needed no one, that he must and could walk his path alone, but why was it that whenever it counted, he would always search for company?

Solas raised his head and reached into his pockets, retrieved the three wolves, and stared at them in his hand.

"A wolf needs a pack."

This room was unbearably quiet and cold.

"You are not alone," said Wisdom, fading with every sweep of the wind.

Solas tucked the wolves back into his pockets and stood, left the room.

He found himself hesitating in front of the door to Bull's room above the tavern, raised his hand to knock, then lowered it, then raised it again.

He sighed to himself. What was he doing, shuffling about like an admonished child in front of their parent's door?

Solas knocked twice.

Soft but heavy footsteps. The door opened.

The Iron Bull blinked at him, absent of his trademark eyepatch.

"I apologise," said Solas. "I know it is late but..."

Bull's face softened. He smiled at Solas and stepped aside to let him through. "You're good, Solas. Dorian and I were just arguing about this poet. Actually, I don't know anything about this guy, I'm just riling Dorian up."

"What?" Dorian asked from the bed, which had books scattered atop it. Ammunitions for their debate, perhaps. "What do you mean you don't know anything about Ignacio? You were arguing as if you'd read him!"

"You can get away with a lot of things just by sounding confident, kadan."

“This is appalling behaviour. Solas! You know Ignacio, yes?”

“I do, yes.”

Bull closed the door as Solas stepped into the room, wary, but Dorian acted as he normally would around Solas.

“Solas, help me out here,” said Dorian.

“No, Solas, help *me* out here,” said Bull. “I’m the one who doesn’t know anything about this guy. But I just know I’m right.”

Bull pulled up a seat for Solas. He sat and smiled as Dorian shoved a book into his hand.

In the end, Solas disagreed with both of them and made his own side. Their debate later shifted to other topics of conversation, light-hearted and heavy alike, though a majority of it was spent listening to Bull’s complaints of having missed the opportunity to ride a dragon.

Since Bull was an early riser, he fell asleep first, snoring softly. Solas stood and returned Dorian’s book.

“I visited Alexius,” said Dorian, accepting the book.

“Has he woken?”

“Afraid not.” He rested his hand on the book, voice softening. “His two apprentices were by his bedside. Rosalie and Felanor. The first thing they did when they saw me was to stand in between me and Alexius, yelled at me that he’d done nothing wrong.” Dorian smiled. “Their company has done Alexius some good.”

“They have. Which is why I find it difficult to believe that Alexius would betray the Inquisition.”

“So do you think he was coerced? Blackmailed?”

“They are possibilities,” said Solas. “And if you or anyone you know is familiar with blood magic, it may be worth investigating if any such influences linger around him.”

“I’ll speak to Leliana about it.” He leaned back in his seat, looked at Solas. “And how about you? Are you alright?”

Solas paused, then, said, “The room feels empty.”

Dorian’s gaze fell. “Yes. The entire castle feels rather empty.” He looked at the scarf around Solas’ neck and smiled but made no mention of it otherwise. “How goes the orb?”

“The first prototype of the stabilising spell failed. The second was also a failure.” He rubbed his eyes. “We are running out of time.”

“Couldn’t you... I don’t know, find ancient elven spells?”

“There is still the added barrier of translating the practical application of such a spell to account for the Veil.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose there’s that.” Dorian stacked the books on the nightstand and sat on the bed, gently moved Bull’s arm to make space for himself. “We’ll find him, Solas.”

Solas nodded weakly. "Thank you for... this."

"Anytime. Our door is always open."

Something tight tangled in Solas' chest. "Even if...?"

Even if he was the Trickster God, the cause of all of this madness? Even if he was why Lavellan battled nightmares, why he was in pain, why he had to carry horrific memories? Even if he was the one who'd walked away from and had continuously sabotaged one of the only good and brilliant things in his life?

All the things he'd attempt to right, all the things he'd attempt to keep... was he simply doomed to damn them all and lose them all?

"Even if you're a little on the wolfish side," said Dorian.

"You do not know the true extent of what I've done. You would not accept me so readily if you did. And you should not." Solas tipped his head. "Good evening," he murmured, and left.

Ellana was late for their research the next morning. She might be recovering from the lack of sleep yesterday, so Solas and Morrigan began without her.

She came into the room after an hour or so with a stack of papers in her arms, the door almost flying off its hinges.

"Solas, Morrigan!" she called and hurriedly deposited the papers. "I think I've got something! I was brainstorming with Knowledge in my dreams, and I think I came up with something. What do you two think?"

They perused through her research and something close to hope stirred in Solas' chest.

"It could work," said Morrigan, nodding slowly as she flipped through the pages. "Yes... An equilibrium rather than a simple balance."

"Here," said Solas, grabbing a pencil and writing a few notes in the margins. "We could modulate this channel."

They buzzed over the new information, used their past attempts to determine possible pitfalls, and within a few hours, the spell was ready.

"We probably shouldn't try this here," said Ellana. "Let's go where there's more room."

"We could ask to use the Undercroft," said Solas.

The three of them left the room and made their way back to the Great Hall, but as they ascended the stairs and neared the door to the Hall, they heard shouts of alarm beyond. They shared concerned looks and rushed into the Hall.

A large crowd had gathered near the entrance, Templars, mainly, all brandishing their swords.

"Never a good sign when Templars are waving swords around," muttered Ellana. They neared the

crowd to investigate and Solas spied a gentle glow of oceanic blue in the middle of the gathered crowd.

“Step aside,” said one of the Templars.

“No.” Abelas’ voice.

“She’s not here to hurt anyone!” And Cole?

Indeed, Abelas and Cole stood at the ends of the Templars’ swords, shielding a spirit pulsing with a blue light—

Solas’ eyes widened in recognition and he shoved his way through the crowd.

“Lower your swords,” said Solas, standing in front of Abelas and Cole, knocking aside the blades with his staff. “What do you think you are doing?”

“That spirit suddenly appeared out of nowhere,” said one of the Templars, “fluttering like it was about to attack! We’re just protecting the people here!”

“An ant would take one step and you would think it is on the attack!”

“What is going on here?” Cassandra’s hard voice demanded from behind them. The Templars turned.

“Seeker Pentaghost! A spirit suddenly appeared in the Hall and almost attacked—”

“That is not what happened,” Abelas snapped.

Cassandra locked eyes with Solas, a question in her gaze. Solas frowned, shook his head. She hardened her expression and scowled at the Templars.

“Stand down,” she said. “Were this spirit hostile, it would be attacking now. And you are pointing your swords at fellow members of the Inquisition, this behaviour is shameful and unbecoming.”

The Templars hesitated, but they lowered their swords.

Cassandra waved a hand at the Templars. “Leave us. We will handle the situation ourselves.”

They shuffled, looked at each other, but they dispersed. Cassandra looked at Solas and frowned.

“What is happening?” she asked.

“This is the spirit who helped Mahanon and I return from the Fade,” said Solas. “A spirit of Memory.”

Asunara peered from behind Cole. “Please,” she whispered. “I have news about the Inquisitor.”

Cassandra’s face fell and Solas’ heart leapt. They rushed to the War Room for privacy, startled Josephine as they passed through her office. Once within the room, Solas turned to Asunara.

“Please,” he said, “what have you heard?”

She shrunk into herself, her oceanic light dimming. “I apologise for suddenly appearing, I— There was no time to wait to visit your dreams and I came as soon as I heard. Lavellan, he— He’s gathering strength. I think he means to reach the Black City.”

The chill that had been shackled around Solas' heart tightened and spread.

"You cannot simply reach the Black City," said Solas. "Not many know where its gates are save for..."

Save for the Magisters Sidereal.

Save for Corypheus.

"Why is he going to the Black City?" asked Ellana.

"I do not know," said Asunara, the pulse of her light quickening. "But he— He does not look well. He is injured and... He is not himself."

Cole bowed his head. "*Keep them safe, I have to save them.* Loud, lost without lights, pushing, tearing." He looked up, eyes wide. "No candles in the dark."

The gates, the seals, Mythal's offer—

"How close is he to the gate?" asked Solas.

"I— I'm not sure, but... I'd say we have less than a day before he reaches it."

Solas turned to Ellana. "The orb! Quick!"

The smiths and workers evacuated the Undercroft. Solas placed the orb in the centre of the large circle they'd drawn and the three of them stood outside it, slammed the end of their staffs into the outer circumference.

"Now," said Solas and they flooded the circle with magic.

The circle glowed green, and the orb hovered, spun in place, sparked with green lightning. Ambient magic thickened, pressed against him like a heavy blanket.

The orb trembled violently.

He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip around his staff.

Work!

The orb glowed like a small sun and Solas squinted his eyes from its light. A gust of wind swirled around them, lifted the ends of Solas' robes, carried with it the sweet lightning of magic.

A shrill, keening sound filled the air.

Work!

The orb spun faster, the lights pulsing, brighter, brighter—

It flared from green to white and Solas closed his eyes and turned away, the wind whipping at him, the ambient magic pressing.

And within a breath, it flooded away, left behind a stillness and silence that felt like a vacuum. The winds calmed, the lights dimmed.

Solas opened his eyes. The orb was hovering above the circle, spinning slowly, now glowing a soft emerald.

“Did it...?” asked Ellana.

Solas stepped into the circle and carefully plucked the orb from mid-air. The magic within pulsed gently like a resting heart, and he could no longer sense any lingering impurities from Corypheus’ misuse. He let out a breath.

They’ve done it.

“It has stabilised,” said Solas. Ellana laid her forehead against her staff and breathed out a sigh of relief. “I’ll begin assembling the approximating array, but the ambient magic from stabilising the orb must be flushed out and cleared from the Undercroft. Otherwise, it may create complications with the Veil.”

Ellana waved him off. “Morrigan and I’ll handle it. You just focus on setting up. We’ll join you after we’re finished.”

He nodded, held the orb closer to himself, and rushed out of the Undercroft.

The moment Solas stepped foot into the Great Hall, Vivienne was already waiting near the door. He walked past her, but she called out to him. Solas stopped, shot her an irate look. There was little time for this, what did she want?

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Solas asked coldly.

Vivienne’s gaze flicked towards the orb, then back up at Solas.

“We need to talk,” she said, walking towards him.

Solas turned to leave. “Your grievances can wait.”

She shot her hand out and gripped his shoulder, stopped him from progressing.

“No,” she said curtly, “they cannot. It is about the Inquisitor and this spirit that has suddenly appeared in the middle of the Inquisition.”

“She is not a danger.”

“*She*?”

Solas brushed her hand away. “Yes, *she*. It is a pronoun, one that you yourself are utilising. Excuse me—”

“We deserve to hear the truth. About the Inquisitor.”

“Deserve?” He turned, faced her, ire scraping against the thread of his patience. “By what right and on what grounds do you have to claim that you deserve anything of his?”

“You are not the only one who cares about him,” she snapped.

A cold breeze blew in through the Hall’s open doors and the flames in the braziers flickered. A

servant came and shut the doors.

Vivienne closed her eyes, took a deep, composing breath, then opened her eyes once more.

“You are not the only one who cares about him,” she repeated, calmer. “And you are not the only one who wishes for his safe and immediate return. We are neither blind nor deaf, Solas. There are questions surrounding the Inquisitor and his past, but we never pried out of respect.” Her gaze hardened. “But circumstances have changed. We cannot help him if we are in the dark.”

Solas gripped the orb and looked away, his gaze falling upon the lone throne.

“Leave it to me,” said Solas. “I have the means to retrieve him. Wait and mind the Inquisition in his absence. That is how you can help.”

Her lips thinned in displeasure. “And how can you find him within the Fade’s expanse?”

“I have methods. As I’ve said, leave it to me.”

Said methods were for finding spirits in the Fade, but he could not risk Vivienne recognising the methodology.

Thankfully, she let him pass, but her gaze burned on his back.

Solas descended into one of the undercrofts that the Inquisition had been using as a storage for armaments, but the recent battle had emptied out the space. He began assembling the array to connect the passage to the closest approximation of Lavellan’s location. The array must be cast in a place of significance to the spirit, and items of great importance must be lain in the middle. Skyhold was significant enough. As for an item...

He gently twisted the ice rose that he’d retrieved from their bedroom, chilly against his skin but not to the point of pain. The late afternoon light flooding in through the undercroft’s opening refracted through its petals, gave it a faint glow.

This rose had persevered through the centuries with Lavellan, unmelting, unwavering. Lavellan had seen it as a symbol of his failure, a reminder that he must be better, but Solas couldn’t see it as a symbol of failure. The little girl had clutched it close to her chest in her final moments. How could it stand for failure? This rose stood safety, for hope, and Solas was placing his hopes upon it too.

Vergala flew into the undercroft through the opening and perched on his shoulder.

“You must stay here in the event that things don’t go according to plan,” said Solas, lightly brushed his fingers over the petals’ edges. It’d been made with such care. “You are his tether to this realm. But I assume you already know so.”

She cawed.

Solas knelt in the middle of the array and gently placed the rose down. Would it be enough?

Smoke and blue light flashed in his periphery. Solas raised his head. Cole was sitting on one of the barrels, head bowed, the brim of his hat obscuring his eyes. Asunara hovered beside him.

“It won’t work,” said Cole.

Solas’ hands were cold. From the rose? Or from the trepidation radiating throughout his body?

“Solas,” Asunara said gently, “Lavellan is no longer a spirit in the traditional sense. It’s difficult to approximate the location of a spirit who has gained a physical form.”

“Regardless, I must try.”

Lavellan was headed for the Black City to right a wrong that he hadn’t committed. He’d already paid time and time again for Solas’ mistakes, for Dirthamen’s mistakes.

For Mythal’s mistakes.

There were too many unknowns with this sacrificial plan, too many hypotheticals. He could not lose Lavellan to it. He could not lose him—

But you already had.

Solas’ hands shook. This undercroft was cold.

“More lights,” said Cole. “The dark is thick, too tight, needles in his blood. It wants him out, wants him gone, wither so he isn’t wrong and wretched. *Keep them safe, keep them safe.*” He wrapped his arms around himself, shoulders hitching, shaking. “Gone, they’re gone. Alone and afraid. *Keep them safe.* But we’re safe, waiting, wishing, hoping, he needs to see—” His shoulders dropped. “But he can’t see.”

Solas looked at him. “Can you sense him?”

“From Memory’s hurt, I see his.” Cole looked up then, eyes wide. “He needs us. All of us. He needs to *see*, needs to hear.” He paused, then reached for the pouch by his belt, stared at the carved rabbit hanging from its button. “*For them and for me,*” he murmured. “*My lights.*”

Cole sat up straighter, fumbled with the rabbit as he untied it from the button, held it up towards Solas.

“Lights!” said Cole. “These are the lights! We can bring him back!”

“I carved these to remind myself to treasure them,” said Lavellan. “The last time I lost myself, I didn’t treat them very well, and I didn’t listen to them. I don’t want to be like that again. This time, I’ll try to listen.”

Solas reached into his own pockets and retrieved the wooden wolves.

Lavellan stared blankly at his tombstone in the Fade. His greatest fear inscribed and revealed to the world. Lost himself, it read.

Solas closed his hand around the wolves and stood. So he would have to come crawling back to Vivienne for help after all, but he would swallow his pride. They all had to bring Lavellan back. Lavellan had led him away from the path he’d thought he would walk alone, had led him into the forest where there were no predetermined paths, with only the promise of exploring the unknown together. Lavellan could not leave now. He was not meant to take Solas’ place on the path.

You said you’d live with us.

“The carvings hold great attachment to him,” said Solas. “He’d given one to each member of the

inner circle. Combined with the rose, that may just provide us with enough anchorage to find him.”

“Do you think it will work?” asked Asunara.

He smiled weakly. “I do not know.”

Even so, he owed it to Lavellan to try. They’d promised one another that they would stop the other from losing themselves, and Solas wished to keep at least one promise in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Chekhov's ~~gun~~ carvings haha :) This chapter was meant to end at the spell working, but the next chapter got too long so i smooshed the beginning bits of it into this chapter. Also because it would mess a bit with the tone of the next chapter.

Haven't actually written much of itfoyl lately. been preoccupied with an original work, but also, i think i just needed a break from writing itfoyl. don't worry, still updates every fortnight as usual unless i say otherwise. i still have buffer chapters!

So strike a match

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

ignite the wick

With Vergala's assistance, Solas called the inner circle to the War Room. Once everybody was assembled, Solas placed the wolf carvings on the table.

"I have succeeded in stabilising the orb," said Solas and the others' expressions lit up in relief. "I can now use it to safely open a passage into the Fade."

"There's always a but," said Varric.

Solas nodded. "But I require items of great significance to Mahanon so that I can approximate his location in the Fade."

As he'd feared, Dorian and Vivienne shot him peculiar looks. Would they recognise what Solas was attempting to do, and by extension, guess at Lavellan's nature? Solas would not outright give Lavellan away, but he was absent of other options and they were running out of time.

"Mahanon gave us these carvings as a reminder not only for us but for himself," Solas said. "He has poured his heart and time into each piece. I believe these will strengthen the tether to him."

"Of course we will give them," said Cassandra, frowning, "but Solas... The spirit that appeared earlier—I heard what it said. It was asking to help the Inquisitor. Is he in danger?"

"So long as he remains in the Fade, then he is in danger."

"That is enough," Vivienne said sharply. "I have tolerated your half-answers and suspect knowledge for the better part of the year, but I will no longer abide by it. *Why* is Mahanon in danger? From *what*? Demons? Spirits? Magic? Corypheus? *What*, spit it out."

Solas quelled the heat coiling in his gut, ignored the warmth forming a tight band around his head. They did *not* have time for this. "This is no time to stand about splitting hairs, Vivienne."

"This is hardly splitting hairs. I believe it to be a reasonable request. Why is the Inquisitor in danger, what from, and why does it feel as though you are racing against time?"

"Because I am," he snapped.

"Then tell us," she said through gritted teeth, "why. How are we to be useful if we do not know the full story?"

"Look, Chuckles," said Varric gently, "we want to help too. But we need to know what's going on."

"I have already explained that I will require the carvings. Beyond that, I cannot explain any further."

"Why?"

“Because it isn’t my truth to give!” he exploded. “And there is too much to explain regardless, requiring time we *do not have*, because Mahanon is on his way to sacrifice himself for the safety of the world with a half-baked plan absent of concrete evidence!”

Their faces dropped.

“What?” Josephine asked shakily.

The heat that had been gathering within Solas fled, left him fatigued. He leaned against the table, head hanging.

“Please,” said Solas, “save your questions for later. The most important part at this moment is to retrieve him before we lose him.”

Nobody moved, perhaps nobody even dared breathe. Solas kept his gaze on the wolf carvings.

Lavellan had said that he wanted to stay, that he wanted to live, so why? Why was he leaving? Was it because Solas had taken too long to decide whether he would stay or pursue his plans?

Was Lavellan deciding to leave before he could be left?

Had he tired of being second to the world?

Curse Solas and curse Dirthamen for being blind, arrogant, and fearful *fools*.

And *Mythal*! Why would she— Offering a plan of self-sacrifice to *Lavellan* of all people? Of course he would take it. He’d been a spymaster, a Warleader, and now, the Inquisitor. All of his positions had involved the overseeing of a large group or an entire nation, positions that would breed the mentality of *‘the many over the few’*.

Perhaps that was why she’d offered it.

But why should Lavellan have to shoulder the fate of the world? He was not the one who’d destroyed reality. Once again, Solas’ mistakes were being fixed by someone else.

“Then I will come with you,” said Vivienne.

Solas snapped out of his paralysed stupor, looked up at Vivienne. “What?”

“Into the Fade. Many dangers lurk within, and you alone may not be enough to bring Mahanon back.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but Cassandra cut in and said, “I will come as well.”

“Me too,” said Bull.

Blackwall nodded. “As will I.”

“Of course I’ll come,” said Dorian.

“And I will, too,” said Leliana softly, to everybody’s surprise. “We promised one another that we will pull the other back if the shadows swallow them.” She smiled along to a joke that only she was privy to. “It is my shift this time.”

One by one, each of them expressed their desires to follow and Solas stared at them.

It was Sera who spoke out. “You’re all nutters. Into the *Fade*? Bones, skin, blood, all of you? In there? That’s for hazy dreams and the things in your head named. Not walking!”

Solas never thought the day would come that he would utter these next words, but he’d been surprising himself as of late.

“Sera is right,” he said, and her face pulled as though that were more surprising and distasteful than physically walking into the Fade. “I understand your concerns and enthusiasm. However, I imagine many of you would not share my comfort within the realm. It may be foreign, unsettling, and perhaps even hostile in certain areas.”

“We can handle a little unease,” said Dorian. “Or even a lot. But I will *not* handle losing Mahanon.”

Solas faltered, his gaze skimming across the steely resolve on their faces.

“You are core members of the Inquisition,” said Solas. “What if something goes awry? The Inquisition will lose us.”

“Then some people stay back,” said Varric.

“I can remain,” said Josephine. “As much as I would like to join the search myself, I am aware that the best I can do is keep the Inquisition afloat in the Inquisitor’s absence.”

Cullen nodded. “I injured myself during the last battle. I’ll only be a hindrance, and I still need to oversee the aftermath and attend to our soldiers.”

“Two advisors staying behind,” said Leliana. “That is still half of the administrative team remaining.”

Why must Lavellan befriend such foolhardy and stubborn people?

Solas bowed his head once more and sighed. He supposed he himself numbered among those foolhardy and stubborn people as well.

“Then you listen to my instructions,” said Solas. “I will not stop you from coming, but if I tell you to return, then you will. And there is no shame in deciding that you will not enter the physical Fade after all.” He stood straighter. “Make your preparations. Dress for battle, bring the carvings. I will be waiting in the fifth undercroft.”

A flurry of activity followed.

Cassandra returned to her room and hurriedly armoured herself, strapped her sword to her belt, hooked the elven shield onto her back. Her ribs still throbbed with every step, a gift from her battle with Corypheus, but she’d weathered worse.

She retrieved her pack in the corner, fingers brushing carefully against the bear and sunray carving hanging from the button.

Self-sacrifice. She may not know much about the circumstance, even less about the Inquisitor himself, but what did that matter? That did not change the fact that he was a good man. And it was

precisely because of this that she understood why he would make such a sacrificial choice.

But he was more than a saviour. More than a leader. Perhaps this was partly Cassandra's doing for having placed such lofty expectations on him. All this talk of providence or destiny, projections of her fears and uncertainties... Did he know that she was content to just walk with him in the early morning? That she was fine with him simply being a man who plants herbs in the garden and plays tricks on people while masked? Had she ever made the effort to show him that he was a friend first before anything else?

Cassandra took the carving and held it close to her as she rushed out of her room.

Lavellan had thanked her for everything she'd done, yet why had he left before she could thank him in return?

This time, she would sit him down and she was going to thank him. Extensively. It would make him complain and he would hide his face from it. So Maker help her, she would drag him back by the ear.

He would be back. They could bring him back.

She believed it. Wholeheartedly.

Dorian quietly readied himself with Bull in their room. The injuries from his fight against Corypheus were on the way to recovery thanks to their skilled healers, but his right knee was still giving him trouble. Must be the cold air. His mother's bad shoulder would always flare up during the cold nights in Minrathous too.

"Of course it's self-sacrifice," Dorian muttered to himself, snapped the collar of his robe into place. His hands were shaking. How trite. "Of course he would do something like this."

Hadn't they made a promise to rise for the other when change was demanded? This was *not* the stepping up that Dorian had in mind, the fool!

His fingers rested on the ouroboros necklace beneath his shirt.

"Whenever you falter," Lavellan had said, *"I hope this reminds you to keep fighting."*

Remind me yourself, you bastard!

They would not lose him. Dorian refused.

"I'm going to let the Chargers know where I'm going," said Bull. "And give them instructions on what to do just in case we..."

"We'll be back," said Dorian, mimicking that hard tone that his mother would use to stop him from doing something that would likely bring shame to their family. Not that it had ever worked. But now, perhaps the mimicked conviction could give them strength. Maybe. "And we'll have Mahanon with us. I will sit him down and scold him until his ears fall off. Then I'll put them back just so I can yell at him some more."

Bull smiled, nodded, gave that affirming grunt of his. "You're right. I'll just tell the boys to get the

drinks ready then.”

He went to Dorian’s side, took his hand, and gripped it in reassurance.

“We’ll get him back, kadan. I’ll help you hold him down.”

Dorian laughed faintly. “I’ll hold you to that, amatus.”

Amatus. The name still made Bull far too warm inside. He’d scoffed at all the romance and softness in the novels that people like Cassandra would read, but hell, maybe he was getting sentimental. Or maybe he’d always been sentimental.

Bull kissed Dorian’s hand and left first, headed down into the tavern below. It was full house tonight. Fair enough. The battle may have been won, but they’d still lost good people, and their leader was missing. It was a situation that’d tempt you to hit the bottles. Bull would join them, but he’d be more useful sober, especially if it was the Fade. He never wanted to go back to that place again, but Mercy was there.

“You’re not Tal-Vashoth. You’re the Iron Bull, Captain of the Bull’s Chargers.”

Bull absentmindedly fiddled with the dragon carving dangling from the war horn on his hip.

Mercy was there.

He found Krem and relayed the situation, then listed off the Chargers’ tasks.

“Make sure the contracts we’ve got in Orlais aren’t left too late, you know how they get. Get Dalish out with Grim on the Val Firmin job, and keep Skinner and Rocky separated for a while until they cool off. If we’re not back within the week, get started on the networking without me—”

“We’ll be fine, chief,” said Krem, patted his arm. “I’ve got you.”

Bull smiled, the socket where his eye used to be throbbing. Not pain. It stopped being pain. Now, it was just an awareness.

“Be back,” said Bull.

“See you soon, chief.”

He squared his shoulders and walked out of the tavern.

Knowing Mercy, he’d be against them going after him, but that was too bad. Mercy still owed him lunch at this tavern in Halamshiral as well as a few bottles of Dalish ale.

Varric filled his quiver with bolts enchanted against demons, and capped it, being careful not to hit the fox carving wrapped around its body.

Noble sacrifices, huh? A hero for the rest of the world. Varric didn’t even fucking know what Lavellan was trying to save them from. Why was he always doing this? Never telling them shit because he didn’t want to worry or scare them, all while he’d take the struggle upon himself. Him and Hawke— Damn stubborn.

Well, the joke was on them. Varric was going to be just as stubborn about getting them to stop being heroes and start being people.

And look, if the Hero of Ferelden could avoid sacrificing herself while still managing to save the world, then... Then there was hope. Whatever bad thing Lavellan wanted to stop, maybe they could find another way. Something that didn't involve him disappearing from their lives forever.

Varric headed out.

Lavellan smiled at Varric, reaching a revelation that made him look lighter than he ever had before. "You know, maybe things are going to be okay."

"Come on, Glow," Varric murmured to himself, reached behind him to make sure the fox was secure around his quiver. "You've gotta be here to see things being okay."

A good man once told Blackwall that he believed in him, and that man offered his hand when Rainier was drowning in the muck of his mistakes. He'd shown Blackwall a future, had set him on the path to atonement, had placed his faith in him over and over. Blackwall owed Lavellan far more than his life.

But this wasn't about debts or repayment. The world and its bullshit could wait. It was simply about this: a friend was lost, believing his death to be the best solution.

Blackwall fixed the phoenix necklace, rested it proudly over his chest as always.

Lavellan was a spark of light in many people's lives. Not someone holy; just someone cherished. His death wouldn't be a solution.

He grabbed his sword on the way out.

Spirits, demons, visions, whatever the Fade would throw at him, Blackwall's heart and resolve would not waver. They had to show Lavellan that his life was far better than his death.

Why was everybody here crazy?

Sera sat huddled in the corner of her little alcove in the tavern, glared at the quiver she'd haphazardly thrown onto the rest of her pile, the honeycomb carving tied around it. No way. No way she was going. Demon-y, Fade-y nonsense—

Why'd that daft tit have to go and do... *whatever* it was he was trying to do? He was always like this! Stayed to drown himself in an avalanche, then drowned himself in weird elf water, and now, drowning himself in Fade juice, *again*! Three times now? For what? The world? What did that even *mean*? Had Coryphenis dropped him on his head too many times?

She'd told him to *stay*! Why does he never listen?

Sera hugged her knees closer, ignored that gross push in her chest crawling up her throat and wrapping around her eyes.

Piss, piss, piss!

She'd asked him to stay...

Why do they never stay?

A stupid, crooked grin, flour on his nose. "Quisitree's got his roots down."

Liar. Bloody liar.

Smoke flashed beside her and she shrieked, jerked back from Cole — when had he become Cole and not *weird demon thing*?

"Oh, sorry," said Cole. He disappeared again and she blinked at where he once was, then started at a knock on her door. "Hi. Can I come in? That's what you say, right?"

Did he... remember that from when she'd yelled at him to knock?

She snorted. Weird. Everyone here was fucking weird. Guess that made her weird too because she was opening the door.

"What?" she asked, staring at him warily.

"He wanted to stay."

"What are you on?"

"You asked him to stay, and he realised he wanted to stay. He wanted to live." Cole looked down. "But that's when he had lights. Now he has none. That's why we have to go. You have to show him, shout, shatter the darkness. He wants to try a new path, but the old one was worn, well-known, the same song he's followed. But it doesn't have to be."

Sera stared at him.

...What?

"Talk proper!" she cried, the pressure in her chest worsening.

He fidgeted with his hands, pulled at his sleeves. Why was *he* being the nervous one? She was ready to crawl out of her skin here!

"He wasn't lying," he said. "He didn't want to leave, wanted to plant his roots, but they didn't get time to be deep enough. Trees need help and time to be deep enough."

"Well," she said, the pressure choking her voice and ugh! Now *she* couldn't talk proper. "Well, he's— Stupid!"

He should have just said so, then! Never talking, what use was his tongue?

She grabbed her quiver and bow and pointedly slung them over her back, tried to put on her bracers, but her vision was blurring and heat was falling from her cheeks, snot falling from her nose.

“Shit, piss, fuck,” she muttered, kept missing the buckle, hiccupped around a breath.

Cole reached for the bracer and she would have slapped his hand away on any other time, but she couldn’t even bloody see properly. He strapped her bracer on for her.

“Pisshead isn’t gonna kill himself,” said Sera around a sob, “‘cause *I’m* gonna kill him! Arrow through his balls!”

She roughly wiped away her tears and snot and marched out the room, Cole following her. Nobody looked at them. Probably because of Cole’s freaky whatever-ness. But she didn’t mind this time.

Vivienne slipped into her robes with a honed and practiced calm, clipped the hilt of her spirit blade to her belt, and retrieved her staff. The swan carving had been incorporated into the centre of the staff’s head, the centrepiece of the metallic swirl of its design.

One for the lives of many. Pragmatic. Vivienne could understand its appeal, its necessity. What was one soul for the rest of the world?

She understood.

And yet.

Small acts of kindness — a cup of tea and a plate of her favourite biscuits left on the table without a note during stressful days, but Vivienne knew only Lavellan could brew this specific tea.

And yet.

“I didn’t want to disappoint you, I suppose.”

Foolish boy.

The world for his life... Vivienne had an eye for horrid trades. This was one of them. Never mind that perhaps she may be selfish by choosing to stop him, she’d already been called it before. She may as well give the rumours merit.

After relaying instructions to Charter, Leliana knelt in front of her shrine to Andraste. She had no long prayers, no chants to murmur, simply a request:

Guide us.

She stood, retrieved the bow and quiver waiting for her on the table.

Oh, Lavellan. Always with that look in his eyes that was far older than his body, the same light shining within Solas’ eyes, the Sentinels’ eyes. Ancient, weary. She had her suspicions, but the information before her still refused to align. Whatever that missing piece may be, it was driving him ever deeper into the darkness.

Once, Tabris had thought that she must trade her life for the sake of the world, to save it from the darkness ravaging the land. But they'd found another way, and Leliana was able to keep knowing her warmth, to keep seeing the sunlight threading through her hair beneath the morning sun, blessed with her laughter and trust. When Leliana had been deep in despair, Justinia had shown her how to save herself. When she had been lost within the shadows, Lavellan had urged her to determine another path besides the one she'd believed to be the only choice.

Leliana rested her hand over the inner pocket housing the nightingale.

"Shall we make a pact? We stop each other from getting lost in the shadows?"

Where there was hope, there was light; where there was light, there was hope. And they were Lavellan's lights.

There must be another way. Another choice. He was more than his duty and his titles.

"Are you ready?" asked Josephine.

Leliana turned and faced her and Cullen, their grim expressions matching. In their hands, they held the carving Lavellan had given them. The kindly elephant and the proud lion.

"I am," said Leliana. "Come, let's walk together."

Mamae, your son is an idiot.

Ellana waited for the others in the undercroft, rolled the halla head carving in her hands, the one that Lavellan had left with her on the day he'd departed for the Conclave.

Solas was standing vigil by the array, so still that he looked like a statue, while Abelas and Asunara spoke to each other in murmurs by the corner.

The passing of the seconds grated against her. Every second was every step of stupidity that Hanon was taking. He'd always been like this. Always taking on responsibility for others, always trying to keep quiet about his hardships and only revealing them when he was at his breaking point. Asshole!

She clutched the halla tighter, the tips of its antlers pressing into her palms.

What if they were too late? What if she loses him forever? She'd been too complacent with letting him be the defender. She should have been there more, should have let him know earlier that he didn't have to be the strong one all the time.

A presence settled beside her.

"Are you cold?" asked Abelas. "There is still time to get yourself a cloak."

Oh. She was shaking.

Ellana laughed lightly. "I'm afraid I'm not trembling from the cold." She could hardly feel it. "Thank you, though."

“How is your leg?”

“It’s been healed. I don’t think I got to thank you for helping me during the battle, by the way.”

“It’s of no concern.”

Ellana looked down at the halla in her hands, rubbed the outline of its back with her thumb.

“Has he always been like this?” she asked. “In Elvhenan?”

He paused, then sighed. “Yes. I failed him then. Then I failed him again. Twice he has perished, and I will not tolerate a third.” His gaze hardened. “Not if I can help it.”

Ellana stared at him, then smiled. She and Abelas had had a rocky beginning, and she suspected they’d keep having a rocky relationship for a while, but it was... a comfort, regardless. That he was bull-headed. That Hanon’s friends were all so stubborn.

“Thank you,” she said.

Abelas tipped his head.

I’m sorry Mamae, but I’m not letting Hanon join you and Babae just yet. I’m sure you understand.

The inner circle entered the undercroft one by one. Each of them placed their carvings in the middle with the rose, and Solas was the last to place his wolves down.

They stepped back as Solas activated the array, the undercroft lighting up with emerald, the orb lifting from Solas’ hand and hovering above the carvings and rose. The items glowed golden and Solas felt the faintest trace of Lavellan’s magic. A good omen.

Solas raised his staff, slammed it down, connected with the orb and tapped into its power.

The orb spun in place, green lightning crackling around it. A whirring instead of a whine filled the air this time, and the Veil felt steadier. Good.

Green light rippled and spread above the array. It wavered, grew into a large seam.

Solas pried the Veil apart.

The seam opened into a rift, a swirl of colours undulating within its depths. Golden threads of light rose from the carvings, intertwined into a single flow, and rushed into the rift. The colours whirled around that golden stream of light, a gentle wind spilling from the rift and caressing his cheeks. Lavellan’s ambient magic curled around Solas like the scarf around his neck.

That golden stream of light burst into sunshine and cleared the swirling colours within the rift, replaced them with a vision of the Fade beyond.

Solas let out a slow breath. It worked. The first hurdle cleared.

He faced the others, swept his gaze across their faces.

“Once again, if you change your mind, there is no shame in it,” said Solas.

Surprisingly, Sera stepped forward first. “Sack, don’t wait for the pants to soak in piss. Let’s just jump in.”

And with that, they retrieved their carvings and dove into the Fade.

Chapter End Notes

past me: hey, it would be cool if we briefly dipped into the inner circle's povs to see the different impacts lavellan has made on them

me, writing it: fuCK YOU, ME. FUCK YOU. YOU MAKE ME SICK. THERE ARE SO MANY OF THEM. THIS IS SO HARD. FUCK YOU, DRINK PIG PISS. AS IF SOLAS WASN'T HARD ENOUGH

anyway, back into the fade! go get your idiot, guys.

Let candlelight dispel the night

Chapter Notes

fun fact, if you put together the chapter titles and pre-chapter italic line quote things from ch 104 to this one in order, they'll form a poem. It's in iambic tetrameter!

anyway, are you folks ready for the finale?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

come call him home

Spirits watched him pass like one would watch a funeral parade. Him in his coat of shadows and the blood — most of it black — that had dried on his armour and skin. He walked ever forward, heedless of his pain, ignored the deep-seated thing unravelling within him, urging him to dig his nails into his skin and peel it away. Ignored how it felt as though the realm was trying to tear him apart. It wouldn't matter soon anyway.

He would reach the Black City soon.

The realm was as Solas recalled from when they'd gone into it physically, emerald skies shifting, the landscape comprised of pieces of the waking world patchworked together.

And in the distance hovered the Black City. Equidistant from all points of the Fade as always.

He turned to the others, appraised their states. The rift was still open behind them.

"Again," he said, retying the wolves to his staff, "return while the rift is still open, if you'd like."

Several of them had discomfited expressions, but nobody made a move towards the rift. Cole held himself tightly, head bowed, shaking, but Asunara drifted closer to him and looked as though she were murmuring something.

"Cole?" Solas asked in worry.

"I'm alright," said Cole.

Solas let out a breath and called the orb back into his hand. The rift closed.

Bull looked around him. "Right, where are we? Mercy should be nearby, right?"

Solas scanned their surroundings. The last time they'd been in the Fade, the pieces from the waking world that had been present were mostly architecture from recent ages, however... this area was littered with—

Ancient elven architecture.

Solas eyed the crumbled tower nearby.

“Is that what I suspect it is?” asked Abelas.

“An Arlathanian watch tower,” Asunara confirmed. “Stationed near the eluvians to Arlathan.”

Solas clenched his jaw. They were on the right track. He spotted a hill in the near distance and pointed his staff at it.

“There,” said Solas. “To gain a better vantage point.”

They hurried to the hill, mercifully not encountering any hostile spirits. It was rather barren. Solas frowned. It was not unusual for areas of the Fade to be empty, but there was... an unexplainable presence in the air, a thin miasma of something neither wrong nor right.

“Is that an actual sun?” asked Blackwall, squinting up at the sky as they made their way through.

“It is uncertain whether it is a true mass of light or if it is simply a faint impression from the waking world,” said Solas.

They ascended the small hill, reached the peak, and stopped.

“Oh, Maker, what is this?” asked Dorian.

Below them, at the foot of the hill, was a field filled with a fog of darkness. A variety of demons roamed the field, minor ones, mostly, but large demons numbered among them as well. They were darting about — attacking the darkness around them.

But beyond the field...

A sharp twist of nostalgia pierced through Solas’ heart.

A grand, yet crumbled staircase awaited at the other end of the field, its steps leading to a large eluvian. Its frame had rusted, its surface dim and dark. A statue of two elves flanked the mirror, both reaching for a carved model of Arlathan hovering above the eluvian’s peak.

The darkness was spilling from the mirror, trickling down the stairs and pooling into the field of darkness ahead.

“Is that... an eluvian?” asked Ellana. “It’s large.”

“That,” Solas said softly, “was one of the only eluvians that could lead to Elvhenan’s capital, Arlathan.” He faced them, grim. “*That* is one of the seven gates to the Black City.”

And judging by the darkness spilling from it, that was the damaged gate.

Solas looked out at the eluvian once more.

Which god was it housing?

“Wait,” said Dorian. “Are you saying the Black City is Arlathan?”

“Yes. The thrones Corypheus saw, I surmise, were the seats of the Elvhen gods.”

“What’s with the black stuff?” asked Varric.

Asunara drifted forward, frowned out at the field. “That is Void energy. It corrupts any spirits that near it. Usually, Fade and Void repel, and the realm attempts to reject and eject the Void energy, but there is a surplus of it spilling from the damaged eluvian. Thankfully, it is only confined to this space. Mechanisms within the Fade are able to filter it before it can spread too far.”

The Titans within the Fade.

“Why is this... Void energy present in the first place?” asked Vivienne.

“Remnants of the poison that gave rise to the darkspawn,” said Solas. “The Chantry’s stories hold a grain of truth. However, we will leave the questions for later. Can anybody see the Inquisitor?”

Lavellan stopped as he reached a field of darkness teeming with demons, eyed the grand eluvian on its other side. The darkness trickled from its base, down the stairs, pooling into the miasmic mass ahead of him.

There it was.

He entered the field of darkness. The nothingness wrapped around him and his coat of shadows, meeting, blending in, but not melding. That urge to claw his skin off vanished, a droplet of clarity rippling in his mind and lifting the haze of discomfort that had only been made tolerable by his single-minded purpose. Lavellan took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Everything was... hazy outside of himself. Outside of his cloak of shadows.

That was fine. They didn’t need to be defined.

Everyone spread out over the hill and scanned the surrounding area, but they could find no signs of him. Unless...

Solas examined the field of darkness. Something shifted within it, a mass of fog that was slightly more concentrated than its surroundings, moving towards the eluvian.

“There,” Solas said urgently. “He’s within the field. We have to stop him from reaching the eluvian.”

“If that’s the thing that caused the darkspawn...” said Varric, tentative.

“It is only Void energy, not the Taint itself. The Taint would have been ejected into the Waking World immediately due to its potency.” Solas gripped his staff tighter. Void energy could only drive one mad if the person was within the realm of the Void, but it could still corrupt spirits. What effects would it have on Lavellan? “Being within it may make you slightly uneasy, but it will not be harmful. However, Cole and Memory, you must stay away from it.”

“But—” Asunara said, then faltered. She sighed and hung her head, the glow of her light dimming.

“Yes, that’s for the best.”

Solas’ gaze softened. “We will get him back.”

Could they?

They must believe it. *He* must believe it.

They rushed down the hill.

“Shit, that place is surrounded by demons,” said Bull as they ran. “We got a plan besides ‘Run in and hope for the best?’ Those guys look so pissed, they’re even punching the air.”

“We will have to use spells that can target large areas,” said Vivienne. “It will be costly, but I assume Solas will have that aspect covered.”

“No,” said Solas. “Do *not* use magic within the field. Fade and Void will repel. Either the spells will nullify or cause a backlash. Thankfully, this will apply to the demons as well, so they will not be able to use their magic.”

“Spirits and demons are still composed of pure Fade essence,” said Vivienne. “Would their presence not be a contradiction to the Void energy?”

“It would be. They will continuously weaken in that field, I suspect. Eventually, they will grow so weak that they are destroyed.”

“So why go to a place that would weaken or kill them?” asked Blackwall.

“Because it is an unwelcome presence, and demons tend to run headfirst into the threat to try and eliminate it themselves. Spirits prefer to stay away.”

“No wonder they’re punching air,” said Bull. “But they also got some big guys in there. Those Pride demons still pack a punch.”

“The mages will have to create an array outside the field that will attract and trap the demons. It should clear the path, and we can make our way through. The arrays cannot attract all of the demons, but it will at least prevent us from being overrun when within.”

Solas kept his eye on that moving mass of darkness. Already halfway through the field.

Hurry.

Lavellan moved through the miasma, kept his gaze on the faint outline of the large eluvian looming in the distance through the fog.

The demons didn’t mind him, continued their fruitless assault on the darkness.

He passed a Pride demon and their eyes met through the fog and cloak of his shadows. A brush of longing swept through him. How he wished he could have said a proper farewell to his Pride. To everyone.

It was fine. They would be alright without him.

Solas worked with the mages to create multiple arrays along the outer perimeter of the field, and soon, the demons came, headed towards the arrays' lurid glows. Once they entered the arrays, Solas raised the orb and activated the entrapments, locked the demons in place. The orb hovered in place, keeping the arrays powered. He turned to Cole and Asunara.

"Watch over the orb," Solas bid and they nodded.

"Let us go," said Vivienne.

They rushed into the darkness. Visibility dropped the moment Solas entered, and the sensation of absence pressed into him, a weight that was not encumbering. Rather, simply *present*. Void. An apt name.

"If you feel any adverse effects," Solas called, "leave the field immediately!"

A chorus of affirmatives.

He ran through the fog, kept the hazy view of the eluvian within sight. Perhaps they could beat Lavellan to the eluvian.

An attracting force rippled throughout the darkness. It had no effect on Lavellan, ignorable, but most of the demons within the field rushed towards the source. Lavellan looked back over his shoulder, frowned out at the fog.

He turned and hurried his pace.

A demon bore down upon Solas. He swung his staff and flung it towards Bull, who cut it down.

More demons came to them, and they clashed.

"Fuck, there's still too many!" cried Varric.

Sounds of fighting. Faint battle cries.

Lavellan ran.

Solas ducked a Shade's slash and jabbed the bladed end of his staff into its face. It shrieked and fled. He kept pushing forward.

How far was the staircase to the eluvian?

Lavellan glowered. Damn this fog, there was too much of it.

"Pride demon!" said Blackwall.

A roar split through the air and a large, clawed hand swiped at Blackwall. He dodged in time. The Pride demon turned towards the others, but Blackwall clanged his sword against his shield.

"Over here, you big brute!" He led the demon away. "Go!" he told the others.

Sera and Cassandra stayed with him to fend it off while the rest ran ahead.

Through the dark haze, Lavellan spotted the bottom of the staircase, just a few more strides ahead.

They were wasting too much time here!

"Look out, kadan!" Bull swept in and slashed at a demon creeping up on Dorian.

More Terrors lumbered towards them, almost surrounding them. Dorian bashed the one in front of him away and Bull felled it, created an opening.

"Go!" said Bull. "We'll handle these little shits."

"I'll cover these two!" said Varric.

Leliana ushered the rest of them forward. "As will I! Go on ahead, I'll cover your rear!"

Lavellan ascended the stairs, each step bringing him away from the field of darkness. The Fade's crushing influence returned and he stumbled, his thoughts filling with the fog of discomfort once more.

He took a few, deep breaths, then forced himself to keep climbing, eyes on the eluvian.

"Move!" Vivienne snapped and yanked Solas back by the collar just as a Terror demon's claws swiped at where he'd been. Abelas slashed at the Terror and bashed his shield against it. Ellana stabbed it from behind with the blade of her staff. The Terror shrieked and dissipated.

Despair demons screeched and arrived, surrounding them.

The four of them stood back-to-back.

"On my word," said Vivienne, readying her staff, "run."

"What?" Solas asked.

"I will create an opening. If I am correct in judging the distance, there is not much left to cover. Go. Convince the Inquisitor to return."

"You cannot use your magic here," said Abelas.

"I would make for a poor mage if I did not know how to defend myself without magic."

"There are still far too many." Abelas paused, then looked at Solas and Ellana. "I will remain with her."

Vivienne nodded and leapt forward, stabbed the blade of her staff into a Despair demon, then roared as she swung it into the demon beside it and knocked it aside. The rest of the demons shrieked, rushed.

"Go!" cried Abelas, kept the demons off them.

Solas and Ellana rushed to the opening, but a Despair demon slipped past Abelas.

Ellana shoved Solas forward and blocked the demon from reaching him.

"Hurry!" she yelled.

Heart in his throat, Solas continued.

Lavellan neared the large eluvian and its towering frame, its metal edges rusted, its surface cracked and dark, pulsing with a quiet gloom. Smoky darkness spilled from its base.

The two statues flanking the mirror had crumbled, their serene visages cracked. The model of Arlathan that they were reaching for was still somehow floating above the eluvian.

This mirror led to home, once. A doorway. Now a gate and a prison.

“Look, Corypheus,” he said with a small smile, raised his loosely clenched fist up and opened it, revealed the eyeball he’d been holding, his palm flickering with emerald light. “It’s your precious gate to the Black City. I told you I’d let you see it. Aren’t I kind?”

He wrapped his hand around the eyeball once more and overloaded the Anchor, purged the eyeball with its discharge.

Ashes fell when he opened his hand. He dusted it off.

A Shade surprised Solas and it struck. He evaded in time, but its claws still clipped his side, dug into the healing injury. Solas cried out. He knocked it away with his staff, clutched his hand to his side, and kept going. Almost—!

He reached the bottom of the stairs. The sick taste of hope surged at the back of his throat.

Solas hurried up, eventually bursting out the fog. His gaze fell on the moving cloud of darkness ahead. For a moment, Solas’ vision tunnelled, the relief that flooded him almost driving him to his knees. Lavellan was there, almost within reach.

Walking ever forwards towards the eluvian.

Lavellan placed his hand on the mirror’s surface, felt the essence of change swirling within, churning with the darkness that had spoiled it.

So, all he had to do was place his soul into the gate. Then everyone would be safe.

The forces of change within the Fade easily answered his call, swirling around him, strings of golden lights joining the cloud of black. Lavellan pressed both hands flat against the mirror.

Tendrils of darkness slipped out of the mirror, wrapping around his wrist, slowly enveloping his forearm.

Golden light joined the cloud of darkness and the air trembled with a tight pressure. Every step forward took effort, as though Solas were trapped within treacle

“Mahanon!” he called.

No answer.

No—

His side wound flared with pain and Solas stumbled.

The wolves on his staff must have been tied too loose because they fell and dangled, knocked against one another.

A familiar sound made its way through the haze that had covered Lavellan's senses, a sharp lance through a veil.

Wooden wolves.

His breath caught, eyes widening.

The darkness inched past his elbows. Lavellan parted the coat of shadows around him and slowly looked over his shoulders.

Solas' face fell when their gazes met.

"Vhenan," Solas said, took a hobbling step forward, supporting himself with his staff, one hand clutched to his bleeding side. The wolves swayed and knocked together again. The sound this time was like a bolt of lightning, the apathy that had clouded him crumbling violently.

Lavellan shook his head. "No," he said shakily. "No, what are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here. How did you even find me?"

Solas took another step forward despite the great effort it seemed to take. "Mahanon, please, step back from the eluvian. Everyone is waiting for you."

Everyone?

The faint sounds of fighting from earlier reached his ears again, distant cries of battle. His eyes darted towards the field of Void behind them.

"You're not supposed to be here," Lavellan repeated frantically. "None of you are! Why are you all here?"

"We came to bring you back." Solas looked at the darkness that had enclosed around Lavellan's forearm, his face falling further. He took another step forward—

"Get back!" Lavellan warned, but his voice came out desperate instead of commanding.

He kept advancing, his expression softening.

"Mahanon, ma vhenan, please," he said and Lavellan trembled. "It need not come to this. This is neither your mistake to bear nor your responsibility to shoulder."

"Isn't it?" he asked softly. A gust of wind began swirling around them, swayed the ends of his cloak and hair. "My impulsivity was the catalyst."

“And we were the ones who did not listen.” Solas shook his head. “We can assign blame all day, but the truth is that we have all made mistakes, some costlier than others. It is unfair for you to shoulder all of them.”

“You don’t understand. This can end what we’ve been struggling with for so long.”

“But I *do* understand.” He stepped forward, wincing as the wind deterred him. The wolves swayed from the unnatural breeze and Lavellan’s heart tugged with their every knock. “I understand more than anyone the want — the *need* — for there to be a perfect, singular solution. But this is too large for perfect, singular solutions now.”

Lavellan gritted his teeth. “This plan—”

“Is a plan built on hypotheticals. This gate has been thoroughly damaged, presenting an unknown variable. It is not— You said that we would find a way together without walking the path of sacrifice.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he snapped. “You sacrificed everything to try and save the world and now we’ve got a method that has the most minimal loss—”

“You *are* my world!”

Lavellan froze.

He glanced back at Solas, whose expression looked close to shattering. The winds picked up, but Solas dug his staff into the earth and stood his ground.

“This is no minimal loss,” said Solas, voice softening into something akin to a plea. “Not to me. Not to any of us. You, and this world that you cherish, is the world that I too have grown to cherish, the world that I have slowly begun to call mine.”

“You’re just saying that,” said Lavellan, warmth pricking at his eyes.

He smiled sadly. “How I sincerely wish that were so. It had felt like a betrayal towards Elvhenan, towards the world that I had known for all of my life. This world and its people... I...” His shoulders slumped and his gaze lowered. “I no longer knew what to do. Stay or leave.”

“You don’t have to choose. Once I become the eighth soul, the seals will stabilise, and their original purpose will be fulfilled. This will keep the poison contained and fix the gate. Removes the immediate threat. It should give you breathing room.”

The darkness crawled its way up to his bicep, and the mirror’s surface lit with a faint glow, a force from within tugging Lavellan closer.

“You can have a chance to live your dream,” Lavellan continued. “Travel, see the entirety of Thedas for yourself, learn new things, settle when you feel inclined. Walk a path of atonement that is dedicated to life instead of death. Find happiness and contentment within the world and yourself once more—”

“That dream is meaningless without *you*!” he snapped.

Lavellan faltered, eyes widening. A pressure joined the warmth building behind his eyes.

“Without you as a presence, whether by my side or not—” Solas gripped his staff tighter, took another desperate step forward. “Perhaps I can live, perhaps I can survive without you, perhaps I

can still feel a modicum of happiness, but I would not be *alive*. You have encouraged me to seek another path, I endeavour you to do the same. Please. Not this path. You have sacrificed enough.”

“It’s *one* life for everyone else’s safety—”

“Forget everyone else, your life’s value is not tied to your service! What do *you* want? You said you wanted to stay, to live.”

“What I want doesn’t matter now!”

“Of course it does, it always has.”

The darkness reached his shoulders, the veins of it crawling up to his neck, the pull within the mirror growing stronger. Lavellan swallowed the lump in his throat and looked away from him, hung his head.

What did he want?

Lavellan scrunched his eyes shut. The wind around them grew stronger.

He just wanted everyone to be safe, for all of this to end...

He just wished he could have had dinner with the inner circle one final time, be it around a campfire or within the Hall’s warmth. To indulge in chess and gossip and games and heartfelt conversations and too much drinking with them one final time. He wished he could have heard Ellana softly humming Mamae’s lullaby one final time, wished he could have seen the sun rising and setting over the Frostbacks on his balcony, wished he could have felt the rain of sunlight in the forest, wished he could have come back home to the purple and blue sails of Clan Lavellan. He wished he could have kept teaching Revasha, wished he could have seen her grow into the leader he knew she could be. He wished he could have taken Solas home with him, hand in hand.

He wished...

No. They weren’t really wishes, were they?

He *wanted*.

“I— I want to stay,” he said, his voice choked. He looked at Solas. “I want to live. I just... want to be happy.”

“Then live, Mahanon.” Solas extended his hand, close enough to grasp if Lavellan reached. “Stay with us.” He smiled. “Take me home with you.”

Lavellan let out a sound between a laugh and a sob. He wanted to take that hand. So badly.

“But the poison,” Lavellan started. “The Veil is already deteriorating. At least this way, there won’t be a race against time. No need to worry about the poison being unleashed.”

“And as I’ve said, this plan is not sound.”

“It’s not like you have a better one!”

“No, but we can find another path.”

Lavellan shook. “You can’t promise that.”

“Perhaps not. However, we can try. Together.”

“Together.”

A promise in a place that he'd once associated with sorrow and farewells, now a place of truth and clarity. A place where a path was revealing itself from beneath the bramble that they'd painstakingly cleared by hand.

He wanted to live. But the world— Could he live with himself if he foregoes the best choice because he wanted to be selfish?

Selfish?

Lavellan paused.

In Elvhenan, he'd placed the safety of the empire, of the people within it, of the El'amelan, of Dirthamen and Solas, above his own. In Clan Lavellan, he'd prioritised his clan, overseeing their rations for winter, their safety. As Inquisitor, he'd put the organisation and its goals and people first.

He was tired.

For once, couldn't he be... selfish?

A rigid indignance hardened within him. Selfish? Had it been another friend in his place, would he not have pleaded for them to step down too? Would he have called their decision to live selfish? No. So why should he— How was this selfish? Wanting to come home, wanting to be alive to enjoy home, to live another day cherishing what was important to him, to be with the people who make him happy... *How was that selfish?*

It wasn't.

His life's value wasn't tied to its service.

I want to live.

Lavellan looked back at the mirror, at the darkness that had reached his chin, sucking him into the mirror.

Was it too late?

He steeled his resolve.

When had he ever given a damn if it was too late?

He concentrated, reached for the connection he'd established with the mirror, and began to sever it.

The mirror rippled, the air growing heavy.

Lavellan yanked at his hands, tried pulling them away from the darkness. He managed to rip his right hand free.

Solas was still waiting, hand outstretched, standing firm against the repelling force in the air. His outstretched hand was bloodstained. How fitting. Lavellan would still hold that hand, no matter how bloodstained.

He gave Solas a relieved smile, reached for his hand—

The mirror shuddered.

Lavellan's smile fell, his heart dropping. Solas' eyes widened and he lunged, reached for Lavellan, but a violent pull began to suck Lavellan into the mirror.

No—!

Solas rushed forward but the air grew even heavier, the winds picking up, pushing him back. They strained to grab the other.

“It's pulling me in!” cried Lavellan. He planted his feet into the ground, tugged, but the darkness swallowed his legs and drew him in faster. “I can't—” he gasped. “I can't get free! Solas!”

Solas gnashed his teeth and lifted his staff from the ground, extended it towards Lavellan to grab, but the wind shoved him back and he dug his staff into the ground once more to stop himself from being blown away.

Their gazes met.

The mirror slowly swallowed him.

“Solas,” said Lavellan, voice small.

Solas roared and fought against the repelling force with an animalistic ferocity, desperation in every action as he threw his hand out, still reaching, still hoping.

Lavellan's heart battered against his ribs, but he forced himself to smile despite the devastation on Solas' face.

His voice was a whisper when he said, “I'm” —*scared*— “sorry.”

“Mahanon—!”

“I love you.”

The mirror pulled Lavellan in.

An anguished scream echoed throughout the Fade.

The winds died down, the area around the eluvian calmed. Solas staggered forward, then rushed towards the mirror and battered his fists against it, screaming.

But the unforgiving surface only mocked him.

Darkness.

He saw nothing. Heard nothing. Felt nothing. And the nothingness had a presence. A weight.

A warmth.

Familiar. Welcoming. It wrapped around him like an embrace and a pressure settled over his chest, as though a hand were resting over it. Grounding. Steadying.

All of his deaths had been violent, painful. In comparison, this... wasn't such a bad way to go.

But I don't want to go.

Lavellan floated in the nothingness, eyes drifting shut.

I wanted to stay.

The hand-like pressure on his chest lifted.

And shoved him back.

Lavellan fell out of the mirror and collided with Solas, who steadied them both in time.

Solas stared at an unconscious but *alive* Lavellan now suddenly in his arms and couldn't help but give out a violent cry of relief.

Chapter End Notes

lavellan got lost in the sauce! thankfully the sauce spat him back out (this man really carried his enemy's eyeball around for days just so he could make a fucked up joke, are you okay king)

that mirror scene gives me 'achilles come down' vibes, but that's probably becoz the rough idea for that scene was conceived when i listened to the song an unhealthy number of times during 2020

but wow! congrats guys! that was the Finale! few more chapters before the curtains close :) i experimented a little bit with this chapter with the pov swaps and in hindsight, maybe not a good idea to experiment during your story's finale *nervous laugh* buuut then again, this entire fic is filled with creative experimentation on my end, so it's also on brand haha

(imagine being the companions and suddenly you hear this anguished cry from a guy you've known to be mostly subdued and only lashes out in times of great stress, and even then, he's still reserved. but now he's outright screaming, and you fear for the worst--)

A way to hold

Chapter Notes

This chapter got a bit long aha. Just wanted to end it where it does. I am also very tired

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

a weight to give

“—*quisitor!*”

He slipped in and out of consciousness. Someone was carrying him on their back. Smelled nice.

“—*orb... rift!*”

“*Look out!*”

Shouting. Ringing of metal. Flashes of light.

“*I’ve got you!*”

“*Solas, over here!*”

Darkness.

Lavellan woke up feeling like an ogre had body-slammed him into the ground. He groaned.

A presence beside him stirred and a cool hand pressed against his forehead, another cupping his neck. Lavellan turned his head away from the hands, maybe somewhat petulantly, and scowled at the offending owner of them.

Solas scowled right back.

“Hold still,” Solas bid.

Lavellan let him fuss, took in where he was in the meantime. Back in his bed in Skyhold. The room was still dim and the air a tad frigid, but the band of light across the sky outside promised dawn. There was a seat beside the bed. Had Solas been sitting there?

“How long have you been sitting vigil?” Lavellan meant to ask, but his throat was drier than he’d expected, and he only managed to get a syllable out before coughing. Solas reached for a glass of water and cupped the back of Lavellan’s head, helped him tilt it up so he could drink. Lavellan gulped it down.

“Slowly,” Solas chastened. Lavellan slowed.

Once he had his fill, he laid his head back down, stared up at the ceiling. Solas sat on the edge of the bed, brushed Lavellan's hair away from his face.

What had he done in the Fade? His memories were worryingly hazy save for the the mirror and of Solas. Those were vivid. Too vivid. To the point that he had to wonder if it had been a dream.

"How do you feel?" Solas asked.

"Like a giant sat on me."

"Most of your wounds are now on their way to recovery, but you still mustn't push yourself. I suspect that you are also suffering from mana drain."

"I have you to thank for the healing, I assume."

Solas rested his hand on Lavellan's head. "And a few others. Would you like to sleep again?"

"How long was I out for?"

"Five days."

Lavellan pushed himself up, winced at the aches in his body. "Then I've slept enough."

Solas helped him sit up and leaned him against the headboard. Lavellan sighed in relief, and finally noticed the sleeping raven at the foot of the bed. His gaze softened. He glanced at Solas.

He was watching Lavellan with that worried scrunch to his brows and tight pull to his lips, as though Lavellan would vanish if he looked away.

How often had Lavellan worn a similar expression?

"Did you mean it?" asked Lavellan. "When you said you wanted to stay?" *Or were you just saying anything to stop me?*

His gaze turned solemn. "Every word."

"Your plans—"

"Can be changed. Another can be thought of."

"You're running out of time," Lavellan muttered.

"Not entirely. There is still time."

He shook his head. "It's not long enough to come up with a new plan."

"On my own, perhaps not." Solas tilted his head, gaze saddening. "Why does it sound as if you are convincing me to leave?"

Lavellan gave him a resigned and weary look.

"Because I don't want you to regret staying."

He averted his gaze so he wouldn't have to see Solas' reaction.

"Or stay out of obligation or pity," Lavellan continued. "I'd rather you just left if that's the case."

Solas shifted in the corner of his vision, sitting to better face him.

“I am staying out of neither obligation nor pity, and I know that the choice I will regret making is leaving.” He cradled Lavellan’s cheek, turned it gently so that they could look at each other.

“Everything I said in the Fade was true. And I will say them again, if need be, and I will show my conviction through action.” He pressed their foreheads together. “I know it is a difficult request to ask you to place your faith in me. I have betrayed it again and again. But... will you give me another chance?”

Another chance?

Lavellan lowered his gaze. “I’ve already been giving you one,” he murmured. “And you’ve been... We weren’t without our complications, but your actions have already been speaking for you. Even when we were at each other’s throats, you eventually reached back.”

“I thank you for offering your hand in the first place.” He took Lavellan’s hand, their fingers threading together. “Forgive me for taking so long to give an answer.”

Lavellan smiled and raised his head. “Ah, but would you even be Solas if you didn’t agonise over your choice first?”

He smiled back. “The last time I did not agonise over a choice, I made the Veil. Be thankful for the overthinking.”

Lavellan snorted and slowly shuffled aside, patted the vacant spot beside him. Solas sat there and let Lavellan use his shoulder as a pillow, held his hand once more.

“What about your injuries?” asked Lavellan.

“They have mostly healed, and the pain is a negligible bother at worst.”

“That’s good.”

Lavellan took in his quarters again. Desk, bookshelf, rug, balcony... He never thought he’d get to see all of this again.

He spotted the orb that was resting on the couch, cushioned by his neatly folded raven cloak, and burst out laughing. His injuries flared with pain and his laughter became a mantra of *ow*’s.

“What is it?” asked Solas.

Lavellan, still grinning, pointed at the orb. “Scary ball of destruction crafted with a Titan’s heart, and it’s just... on the couch. You know. Just resting. Putting its feet up, lounging back.”

“You are ridiculous.”

“You’re smiling.”

“You aren’t even looking.”

“I can hear it in your voice.”

Solas’ shoulder shook from his quiet laughter. He leaned his head on Lavellan’s. “I had nowhere else to put it.”

“Should have put it on the bed, given it blankets and pillows. For shame, Solas, where are your

manners?”

“You are ridiculous,” Solas said again and Lavellan’s grin widened.

But seeing the orb just reminded him of a whole other problem, and his grin faded. He stared at his left hand, the one holding Solas’ hand.

“You’ve stabilised the Anchor?” asked Lavellan.

Solas nodded. “It is easier with the orb.”

“You know that’s temporary.”

His grip tightened around Lavellan’s hand. “We will talk about it when you have recovered your strength.”

For a while, they said nothing else and watched the sunrise, comforted by one another’s presence. To think that he’d get to see another dawn...

Once the room was bright with sunlight, Lavellan broke the silence.

“Something pushed me out.”

Solas lifted his head, looked at him. “Pushed?”

“While I was in the mirror. I felt the nothingness wrap around me, and then...” He frowned.

“*Something* pushed me out.”

He paused. “Do you think...”

“That it was the god in the mirror? I don’t know.” He noted that the ice rose on the fireplace mantle had its petals facing right instead of left like how he’d usually put it. “How were you able to locate me? Did you know where the gates were?”

“No. I used the approximating spell for locating spirits.”

“Cast in a place of significance and with objects of significance to the spirit.” He frowned. “I assume you cast it in Skyhold. But what items did you use?”

“The ice rose and the carvings you’d given us.”

Oh... That was... That meant everyone had pitched in.

“I’m sorry,” Lavellan murmured, gaze lowering. “I got so caught up with... I must have given you all a fright.”

Solas didn’t answer and Lavellan had no courage left to meet his gaze.

“What happened?” Solas eventually asked.

Lavellan gripped Solas’ hand tighter. “The Anchor was hurting, and I couldn’t think. Corypheus beat the shit out of me, threatening to break into the Black City and hurt the Inquisition. Said that he would pike all of your heads and line the path to Skyhold with them, that he will hang your bodies over the battlements. Then the earring fell out and— He broke it. He broke—” He shook. “And I couldn’t find the grounding stone.”

“The earring? From Dirthamen?”

He nodded weakly. “And I couldn’t find the stone you gave me in Haven. I don’t remember what happened afterwards too well. I just knew I couldn’t let him proceed, so I forcefully extracted his memories of the Black City’s location. Then I killed him.” He pursed his lips. “I have a feeling I didn’t make it quick.”

“I am sorry.” Solas placed his other hand over their joined ones. “That was a difficult ordeal to have undergone alone.”

Lavellan curled up beside him. “I can’t believe you all came.”

“Because you are cherished.”

Warmth sprang to Lavellan’s eyes. He took a moment to compose himself. “I’ve invited questions this time, haven’t I?”

“I’m afraid so. I did my best to keep your secret as it was not mine to give.”

“Thank you,” he said. “What about you? Surely you invited questions too.”

“Dorian has deduced who I am. As for the others, I am not certain what conclusions they have arrived at. In any case...” He closed his eyes. “I suspect that the time for us to divulge our truths is near.”

Lavellan sighed. “I think you’re right.” He held their joined hands close to his chest. “But we’ll do it together.”

News of his waking spread. Lavellan couldn’t delay facing the rest of the inner circle any further. Once he could move and leave the bed, he opened his wardrobe and stared at the golden uniform hung on the back of it.

Solas watched him, seated on the edge of the bed.

“Could you please help me?” asked Lavellan. Solas stood and helped him get into his uniform, going slow whenever Lavellan grimaced, and buttoned him up. He smoothed his hand down Lavellan’s front, then looked at Lavellan with a certain melancholy in his eyes. Lavellan smiled wanly, cupped his cheek. “What’s with that look?”

Solas responded by kissing him. Lavellan kissed back, hand resting on Solas’ chest, over his heart.

When they pulled away, the melancholy in Solas’ eyes had only grown.

“My heart,” Solas murmured, “you kiss me as if you are still prepared to say goodbye.”

Lavellan’s gaze dropped. “I’m sorry. I’m just... not used to people staying.”

Solas’ expression softened and he tucked Lavellan’s hair behind his ear, then wrapped the Dalish scarf around his neck. Lavellan tucked his chin into its warmth.

“It smells like you,” said Lavellan.

“I missed you.”

He took Lavellan’s hand and together, they walked out.

When Lavellan appeared in the Great Hall, a crowd was already waiting. A few were weeping.

He smiled at them. “Hello, everyone. I’m back.”

Lavellan faced the inner circle in the War Room. Some looked angered, some relieved, and Lavellan’s words stuck to his throat, his gaze lowering.

“Thank you all for your efforts to bring me back,” he said. “I know many of you have questions and I...” He took a deep breath, looked them in the eye. “I think I’m ready to answer them.”

Solas reached for his hand and held it. Some of Lavellan’s apprehension dimmed.

“His truth and mine are intertwined,” said Solas. “I am prepared to reveal mine as well.”

Lavellan’s tension was still twisting his stomach, but Solas’ hand in his made it bearable.

“We probably need to sit down for this,” said Lavellan.

Josephine sighed and gestured at the door. “We can have this conversation in my office.”

Everyone gathered there, sat on available seats. Some sat on the floor. Lavellan and Solas remained side by side, hands clasped tight. Cole sat on his other side. Ellana sat directly across him so that he’d have a neutral point to look at.

“Before we begin,” Lavellan said, “please let me speak, save the questions for after. You’ll hear things that are confusing, things that you’ll think never happened, but just... let me finish the story.”

The others shared looks with each other.

Lavellan took a deep breath. “The year was 9:41, and a Conclave was called...”

He and Solas talked about their origins, their history, the fall of Elvhenan and their roles within it...

The time travel.

When they finished their stories, everybody was quiet. Lavellan twisted the ends of the Dalish scarf with one hand, squeezed Solas’ hand with the other. Solas squeezed back. They’d been talking for so long that it was already late afternoon.

“So,” Lavellan said, voice already hoarse. “Questions?”

They all stared at him in varying degrees of wide-eyed and horrified. Bull’s expression looked

shattered.

And Cassandra...

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and all she could do was stare.

“Why?” Sera asked softly, knees tucked tight to her chest. She refused to look at anyone else. “I don’t get it. *He* made everything go tits up! Why’re you still with him?”

Lavellan smiled sadly. “Because I could see he was trying this time. And... because I still loved him.”

Solas bowed his head. Sera’s face scrunched, then she stormed out of the room.

Nobody said anything.

Eventually, Solas stood, still holding onto Lavellan’s hand. “I believe it is best if we... come to terms with the new information in our own time. And Mahanon needs to rest. This has been a taxing ordeal for him, too.”

“I— Yes,” said Josephine. “Yes, that is... best.”

Wordlessly, Solas led Lavellan out of the room and Lavellan could only follow, numb inside.

Lavellan sat on his bed, slightly out of breath. Solas sat beside him, brows furrowed.

“Are you alright?” Solas asked.

He nodded. “Just... drained. Physically and mentally. I did just drop earth-shattering revelations. How are you? Revealing... all of that. That must have been difficult for you too.”

“It is always easier when someone is walking by your side.”

“Still hard.”

“Yes.” He brushed Lavellan’s hair out of his eyes. “But not as hard as it could have been alone. Now, come, I will help you change into more comfortable clothes again. Your body requires more rest.”

Solas helped him get changed and Lavellan sat on the bed after, leaning back against the headboard.

“Thank you,” said Lavellan.

Vergala flew in through the window then and settled on his lap, warm. He rubbed the underside of her beak. “Do you think Asunara is still here? I need to talk to her. Appearing in Skyhold where the Veil is quite thick... It would have taken a lot of willpower to cross.”

Solas hung the uniform and closed the closet. “You should rest first.”

“I am. On the bed. Resting.”

He sighed. "She has not left, worrying over your state. She is usually in the company of either Cole or Abelas. Now that you are awake, I do not know what her plans are."

Lavellan hummed. "Gala?" he asked and she cawed. "Could you find Nara for me, please?"

She took off from his lap, disappearing out into the late afternoon sky. Solas sat on the edge of the bed beside him.

"How are you?" Lavellan asked.

"Apprehensive of their reception."

"Give them time to process it." Lavellan offered his hand. Solas took it, brushed his thumb over the back of Lavellan's hand.

"You did well."

"You too." Still, he couldn't wipe the memory of Sera's fearful expression, of the sudden steel in Vivienne's eyes, the heartbreak in the others'. He looked up at the ceiling. He didn't want to lose any of his friendships, but... Well, they were entitled to their own reactions.

Shortly after, Vergala returned and perched on the upper walkway's railing. A blue glow flashed in the room, and Asunara's oceanic light hovered at the foot of his bed. She said nothing, looked as though she wanted to shrink into herself. Lavellan was reminded of when she'd been that small child huddling in a corner, recoiling from her master's corpse.

"Nara," he murmured, and she looked up at him. He gestured her closer. She hesitated, then drifted towards his bedside. Lavellan smiled and gestured her even closer.

Once she was close enough, he let go of Solas' hand to pat her on the head. Spirits didn't have hair, but he still ruffled the impression of it. Solas rested his freed hand on Lavellan's thigh.

"Remember when you got emotional during one of the missions I gave you and you dropped the job?" he asked. "You hid from me for months."

"I thought you would be disappointed," she murmured.

"Was I?"

"...No."

"Do you think I'm disappointed or angry now?"

"This is different. I directly interfered. I pushed you when you weren't ready."

He sighed and retracted his hand, resting it over the hand Solas had on his thigh. "Maybe. But I'm still not angry."

"Nevertheless, I'm still sorry."

"Okay," he said gently. "Forgiven."

She said nothing, head hung. His gaze saddened.

"You've shouldered so much for so long," he said. "Thank you for trying so hard to heed my request, and for trying to lead everyone to me. You've done so well. I'm so proud of you. I always

have been.”

Her light flickered and her shoulders shook.

“It’s been really hard, hasn’t it?” he asked. “And lonely. All of the hard calls you’ve had to make, all of the memories you’ve had to shoulder. It must have been so hard.”

She nodded shakily, her light dimming, a small sob wracking her form.

Lavellan patted the spot beside him and Solas. “Come here. It’s alright.”

Asunara drifted closer to him, perching on the bed, but Lavellan wrapped an arm around her and eased her towards him into a hug. She clung onto him and shook. It was as close as a spirit could get to weeping. Lavellan just held her, stroking the back of her head, murmuring the gentle and kind words she deserved to hear.

Such tragedies they’ve all undergone.

“*Gala,*” he called, “*go to Ellana. Ask her for Vedir’s last letter in the Keeper’s book.*”

Vergala flew out again. Lavellan kept holding Asunara against him.

“I thought I’d lose you again,” she whispered.

“I know, I’m sorry.” He held her tighter. “But I’m still here. I’m here.”

Vergala soon flew back in with the letter in her beak. She landed beside Lavellan and put the letter on his lap. He offered it to Asunara.

She lifted her head, her light now a little brighter, and accepted the letter.

“From Vedir,” said Lavellan. “He’d left you, Abelas, and me a letter each.”

She laughed weakly. “Is this going to make me emotional again?”

“Made me emotional. It seemed to give Abelas a crisis. Not sure about your letter, but this *is* Vedir we’re talking about.” He smiled. “Always good at seeing through all the bullshit you put around yourself and stabs you right in the heart.”

“I miss their cooking.”

“Me too.”

“I miss your cooking too.”

Lavellan’s smile widened into a grin. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to visit Skyhold more often so you can eat what I cook.”

“Spirits can’t eat.”

“Cole can. Not very often, but he can if he wants.”

She looked at him. He kept smiling at her. She let out a shaky breath. “Are you saying...?”

“It’ll be strenuous, but your mental fortitude has always been one of the best. It’s why you could help me keep Dirthamen’s secrets.”

“Won’t crossing be dangerous?” she asked.

“If you were able to cross into the Waking World in *Skyhold* where the Veil is at its strongest, then I imagine gaining physicality in areas such as... say, Crestwood, would be a cinch. You also still have a strong memory of your physical form.” Lavellan shrugged. “It’s up to you, of course. You can still visit even as a spirit.”

“Simply mind the Templars,” Solas said dryly.

“She belonged to the best group of agents,” said Lavellan. “Templars have nothing on her.”

“Best? Now you are just patting your own back.”

“You can pat it for me, if you’re so worried about that.”

Asunara laughed softly, stared at the letter in her hands, played with its edges. “I’ll... think about it.”

Lavellan smiled and nodded.

Over the week, he recovered his strength. He’d spent most of his time recuperating in his room for the first few days, writing more information from the Well of Sorrows to allay boredom. The healers had prohibited visitors besides Solas and Ellana.

Once he felt well enough, the healers gave him clearance to roam around on his own. He immediately checked on the soldiers and visited the medical hall, kept himself busy to a reasonable extent.

Maybe he was running away from the inner circle a little, too.

Lavellan made his way to the battlements after and stood there beholding the mountains. There were scorch marks on the stones of the bridge, the path to Skyhold was blackened, and they were still repairing the first watch tower along with the drawbridges. It would take a few months for those repairs. Years for the land to recover.

Someone softly cleared their throat behind him.

Well, he was only surprised it took this long for one of them to approach him.

Lavellan took a deep breath and steeled himself. Then, he faced the Iron Bull.

He offered Bull a weak smile. “Hey, Bull.”

“Hey, Mercy.” He made his way over and stood beside Lavellan, looking out at the Frostbacks. “How you feeling?”

“Better. You?”

“Yeah, I’m doing alright.”

The wind howled gently, swayed the ends of Lavellan’s hair and scarf, chilled his nose and the tips

of his ears.

“The Qunari bastard who betrayed you,” Bull started, “he—”

“Wasn’t you.”

“That’s nice of you, Mercy, but you literally told us I tried to fucking kill you.”

“The Iron Bull then isn’t the Iron Bull of now. You’ve taken a different path, and you’re a different person. *You* didn’t betray me.” He sighed. “And maybe it was partially my fault. I never tried to get to know you past a professional distance then.”

“There you go again, blaming yourself for shit you had no say in. It’s not your responsibility to befriend everyone around you if you don’t want to.”

“Maybe not.” He placed a gentle hand on Bull’s arm. “But I’m glad I tried this time. Thank you for your support, for the care you’ve shown me.”

Bull let out a heavy breath. “I should be saying that. Past year’s been shit for a whole lot of us, especially you.” He paused, bowed his head. His voice was soft when he asked, “Hey, why did you... let me in the Inquisition? Near you?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. In the beginning, I told myself it was because I needed your skills and the Chargers. But some part of me was still glad for your company again. By that time, it’d been three years since the Exalted Council.” He picked at the threads of his scarf. “I’m sorry, I can’t give you a straight answer.”

He paused, shook his head. “No, I get it. It’s hard.”

“What about you? Aren’t you scared? About what I am?”

“Maybe in the beginning. But I know you. Whatever you are, spirit, ancient elf, guy who gets knocked out after a tankard of *Maraas-lok*—”

“Hey!”

“—you’re still Mercy to me. Who you are matters more to me than what you are.”

“Not worried about me becoming a demon?”

He shrugged. “We’ll throw a net over you and haul you back home until you calm down again.”

Lavellan burst out laughing and Bull grinned.

“Don’t you mean until I *clam* down again?” Lavellan asked. “Net? Fishing?”

Bull’s grin became a grimace. “We need to get you a better sense of humour.”

“My sense of humour’s just fine, thanks.”

Bull grumbled. Lavellan laughed anew, a small weight easing in his heart. There were still more things, heavier things, to speak of, but Lavellan wasn’t quite ready for that for now. Neither was Bull, he suspected. But it was a step towards anything resembling peace between them and for themselves.

A step was better than nothing.

After conversing with Bull, he headed for the War Room for a meeting and faced off against the large door. He took a deep breath in, out, and entered.

His advisors looked up, quiet as he made his way to the table.

“Inquisitor,” Josephine greeted softly. “It is good to see you well.”

He nodded stiffly, resisted the urge to fiddle with the edge of his sleeves. “Thank you.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Cullen.

“A bit better. Recovering from, uh, mana drain as well.”

“Right, yes. Of course, that... would make sense. You *are* technically a mage.”

“One of the best among Elvhenan, barring the Evanuris,” said Leliana, offering him a smile.

Lavellan returned it. “Ah, well, I wouldn’t say so, but thank you.”

She raised a brow. “Humble! I believe Solas said you’d ‘revolutionised the concept of shapeshifting.’ And praise from him is difficult to come by, so the few he gives hold weight. More so now that we know his true identity.”

“I guess you see now why I’d laughed at your speculations.”

She laughed softly. “I was not too far.”

“No, you got quite close. Just had the wrong god.”

“I really should be asking *you* for advice on how to be a better spymaster.”

He snorted. “You’re already doing well, Leliana. You don’t need advice from me. I’d say you’re El’amelan material already.”

Her smile widened. “High praise.”

Some of his discomfort waned and he relaxed. He gestured at the table. “Shall we? Brief me on what I’d missed.”

They caught him up on Skyhold’s state, the current plans for reparations, offers from neighbouring countries, as well as the commemorative ceremony they were wishing to host now that he was back. Afterwards, Leliana looked at him.

“You’ve heard about Alexius, yes?” she asked. He nodded. “What do you think?”

“I don’t believe it. Something isn’t right.”

She hummed. “Well, I’ve just received word earlier that he is awake. I have not spread the news as a precaution. To avoid any overzealous souls from taking matters into their own hands before we hear the entire truth.”

He straightened his back. “Thank you. Is he fit to receive visitors?”

“Only a few at a time.”

“Alright, I’ll pay him a visit.”

Lavellan made his way through the medical hall, knocked on Alexius’ door, and entered.

Alexius was in bed, looking out the window, his pallor and sunken cheeks making him appear older than he was. Lavellan entered and closed the room softly. His gaze fell on the couch in the corner, where Alexius’ two apprentices, Rosalie and Felanor, were asleep next to each other with a blanket around them.

“Could you pull their blankets up?” Alexius asked, voice raspy, gesturing at the two girls with a trembling hand.

“Of course.” Lavellan walked over to them and pulled the blankets up to their shoulders, tucking it so it wouldn’t fall. He pulled up a chair beside Alexius and sat. For a while, neither of them said anything. They looked out the window together, watching the clouds march along the blue skies.

“I suppose they think I’ve betrayed all of you?” asked Alexius.

“Yes, but I think there’s more to it than that.”

“You sound certain.”

“I am. You’re not loyal to Corypheus or the Venatori. You enjoy the work you’ve been doing here. You care about your apprentices and some of the mages you’ve worked with.” He looked at Alexius. “So, what happened?”

Alexius laid his head back against the pillow. “Your faith in others is obnoxious.”

“Thank you. So? What were you doing at the portcullis’ mechanism?”

He closed his eyes. “Believe it or not, I was attempting to stop the culprits.”

“I believe it. The Inquisition soldiers you’d killed were spies?”

“Infiltrators. They must have come in while you were preoccupied with evacuating everyone through the mirror. I vaguely recognised them from the Venatori, but I wasn’t certain. Nevertheless, I kept an eye on them. Surely enough, they tried to sabotage early on with the portcullis. A fight erupted between us.” He gave another dry chuckle. “But I’m no longer a young man. One mage against two.”

“How soon did they try to sabotage us?”

“The moment the darkspawn reached the bridge, before your elven wards could activate.”

Lavellan’s eyes widened. “But the portcullis didn’t open until much later. *You* held them off for that long? On your own?”

“Not bad for someone going on sixty.”

“Well, you were hard to fight in the alternate future, even with five of us. So maybe I shouldn’t be too surprised.” He frowned. “That means we owe you a large part of our victory.”

Alexius scoffed. “You owe me nothing.”

“Don’t be stubborn. We’ll arrange for your efforts to be recognised too.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Nope, I’m doing it.”

He made an irritated noise. “You really are a roach.”

“Hard to kill, I know. And you’re a geriatric sod as always.”

Alexius opened his eyes. He looked tired. Maybe Lavellan should come back later. He’d gotten his answers anyway.

“Rosalie and Felanor told me you were missing for a while,” said Alexius. Lavellan looked out the window again. “What happened?”

He paused, then sighed. “Oh, what the hell. May as well tell you. Surprise, I’m a mage.”

Alexius’ head snapped towards him.

Lavellan tapped his temple. “And I now happen to have ancient elven knowledge in my head. I knew how to... *fix* this Blight business. I... killed Corypheus in the Fade, extracted his memories of where the Black City was, and I was about to fix the gate to the Black City.”

“And the cost? There is always a cost.”

He smiled wryly. “My life.”

Alexius’ expression turned grim. Lavellan looked away.

“The others came to stop me,” he murmured. He bowed his head, stared at his hands clasped over his lap. “I get it now, what you said. *My* world and *the* world.”

“Self-sacrifice.” He snorted. “Always presented as a panacea. Everyone wants a convenient way to fix the world. The Hero of Ferelden proved that she had her wits about her when she declined.”

“I just worry that maybe it *was* the best choice.”

“Never trust solutions that appear like they’re the best choice. The real best choices are complicated. They’re processes, just as a spell is a series of steps that build and combine to make a whole. If someone were to hand you a one-step spell that claims it can make a tree grow, what would you think?”

“That it’s a scam. Making a tree grow needs a lot of steps, never mind adding magic to it.”

“Precisely. Who suggested this outrageous sacrificial plan?”

Lavellan laughed. “An elven god.”

“Gods are out of touch. Never listen to them until they know or remember what it’s like to be frightened and mortal.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Unbelievably recent experience.” He grunted. “I suppose I owe you some of that too.”

Lavellan leaned back in his seat, somewhat comforted by the advice.

“So, why did you come back?” Alexius asked.

“Well...” Lavellan grinned at him. “A grumpy old man told me to mind my world.”

He chuckled. “I suppose you’re not a lost cause after all.”

They both looked out the window again.

“Open it,” said Alexius. Lavellan stood and opened the window, a fresh and chilly yet gentle breeze sweeping in, the faint sounds of Skyhold’s bustle spilling into the room. Alexius relaxed into his pillow, closing his eyes. “Inquisitor...”

Lavellan glanced at him. “Hm?”

“Make sure Rosalie and Felanor get a good education. They’re hardworking and intelligent. It would be a shame if they’re not allowed to show the world their true potential just because of their background.”

“I’m working on that. I’ll make sure they get the education they need.”

He nodded. “Good. And give my schematics to Dorian. As much as he slacks off, he’s got a good head on his shoulders when he applies himself. Skilled boy, that one.”

“True.” Lavellan frowned, sitting up. “You can do that yourself, though.”

He didn’t open his eyes, didn’t say anything else.

Lavellan’s frown deepened. “Gereon...”

“I don’t have long.”

Another breeze swept into the room, chilling the side of Lavellan’s cheek.

“You don’t know that,” said Lavellan.

He smiled. “I am the one inhabiting my body. I know its limits, and I went beyond them. These injuries will not heal.”

“You’re not dying.”

“If only we can stop that process just from resolutely declaring it.” He opened his eyes, looked at Lavellan, and made a sound in between a laugh and a scoff. “What are you getting teary for? You’re not getting out of work either. Now that I know you’re a mage, go take some of my books full of spells with ancient elven roots. You and Solas can probably make better use of them. I could never get them to work, but I have a feeling you can.”

“You’ll recover.”

“I can feel I don’t have long left. Maybe a month. But don’t celebrate just yet. I’m going to get out of this bed first.”

Lavellan bowed his head, blinking back tears. He looked up and smiled shakily.

“Well then, you better get to it, old man.”

Chapter End Notes

Alexius: gods ain't SHIT, don't listen to them

Lavellan: i see now why solas likes you

In any case, everything's out. and now, time to pick up the pieces

Seeds to sow

Chapter Notes

my bad it's late! there were some interruptions. life. u know how it is

also, don't mind the fact that the final chapter count keeps climbing, it's just me underestimating how much left i still need to write. as usual

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

and pains to rest

Plans for the commemorative ceremony went underway, but the advisors kept trying to get Lavellan to take a break and leave most of it to them. In the end, it was easier to just let them do it than fight them on it.

And he couldn't avoid his friends forever.

Tomorrow. He'd talk to Cassandra first tomorrow.

For now though, he sat on the edge of the bed, weary from the day. Being convalescent was irritating.

"Here, vhenan," said Solas, untying his cloak. "You have had a long day. Get to bed."

Lavellan blinked, and before he knew it, he'd been divested of his scarf and cloak and Solas was already kneeling to take off his shoes—

"Solas—" he said, flustered. "It's fine—! I've got it—"

And he'd taken the shoes off already.

Lavellan placed a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you, vhenan, but I'm alright, just a bit exhausted. I won't collapse on the floor, I promise. Actually, I'm more worried about you."

He'd been taking care of Lavellan extensively lately, and yes, Lavellan was still recovering, but this was... Well, it was kind, and he truly appreciated it, but...

Solas frowned. "Me? There is nothing to be concerned about."

"Well now, that's just not true. I'm not the only one who—"

He cradled Lavellan's face, frowned deeper. "You are pallid. You have been overworking yourself again. Stay here, I will run a bath."

"Wh— Solas—!"

Solas ducked into the bathroom. Lavellan stared at the door, then rubbed his face with a sigh. Fine, he could get away this time. But Lavellan wasn't letting up tomorrow evening!

The next morning, he hesitantly made his way towards the training grounds. Sure enough, Cassandra was there, slashing at the dummies. She noticed his approach and stopped, her sword lowering by her side.

He stood a few strides away from her and they stared at each other. He tried to say something, but he forgot everything he wanted to say. Shit.

Cassandra beat him to it.

“It was not your fault.”

He lowered his gaze. “I still killed you.”

“That time I saw you at the Conclave...”

“I ran because— Because I was reminded of what I’d done. It was hard, seeing you again.”

“And now? Is it still hard to see me?”

Lavellan looked up at her, took her in as she was now. Cassandra. Dear Cassandra. Loyal, steadfast Cassandra. Her hair had grown a little longer again. She was usually good at maintaining its length, but the past few months have been busy.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I’d still have dreams of that final night. Of me stabbing you. I’ve been told over and over again that it wasn’t my fault. Rationally, I know that. It literally wasn’t within my control, but I still held the dagger. I still... have to live with the fact that you died at my hands. And... it also hurts to look at you now because you still believe in me, no matter the lifetime.” His gaze dropped. “Some of the inner circle have changed. Some, like you, barely have. You still stand by me now as you’ve stood by me then. And every time, I’m scared I’ll lead you all to the same end. That nothing good can come out of following me.”

A breeze blew past, carried with it the chill of the late autumn breeze. He pulled his scarf up higher and tucked his chin into its warm folds. Or maybe he was trying to hide.

“I see,” she said softly.

He heard the slide of her sheathing her sword, the crunch of her approaching footsteps. He expected that he’d be choked up, that he’d tremble, expected that familiar wash of grief to coat him and freeze him. But... nothing. Simply an ache.

She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Such a heavy weight you have had to endure... Mahanon, if I may say something?”

He looked up at her and gave her a small smile. “You don’t have to ask, Cassandra. I’ve always appreciated your honesty.”

“You say I’ve barely changed. Then I believe I am also speaking for this alternate version of myself when I say this.” Her gaze was gentle, but her mouth was set into a firm, resolute line. “You no longer need to shoulder the weight of my life. It is time to lay it to rest.”

Lavellan stared, the ghost of that future version of her briefly overlaying her now.

She pulled him into an embrace. His eyes watered.

“And it is time for *you* to rest,” she said.

A sob wracked him once, the first of his tears falling. Cassandra held him tighter.

“I meant to thank you too,” she murmured. “Thank you for all you’ve done to watch over us. And thank you for staying.”

He returned the embrace and wept quietly into her shoulder.

“You are a friend first before anything else,” she said. “Inquisitor, Herald... Those never come before you, Mahanon. And I am sorry if I ever led you to believe otherwise. I am sorry if my doubts and fears have ever burdened you.”

He shook his head. “You were never a burden,” he said through his wretched tears. “Never.”

“If those nightmares ever plague you again, come find me. I will be there to lend my shoulder and ear.”

He clung to her tighter, sobs soft but forceful. “I’m sorry. I miss you.” He trembled. “I miss you.”

Cassandra wrapped her arms around him further, as if trying to shelter him from the world. It worked, somewhat. He let the world fall away and just focused on her presence, a lighthouse through the fog, unerringly guiding him back.

“I’m here,” she said.

He could only respond with a relieved snuffle.

When his tears stopped, they walked together around Skyhold in a companionable silence.

That evening, Lavellan invited the inner circle for a game of Wicked Grace at the tavern. This was going to be the first time he’d be seeing some of them again after the revelation. He was fully expecting for nobody to show.

“They are going to attend,” said Solas with a sigh.

“They all hate me now.”

“They do not.”

“I’ll be alone at the table, looking like an idiot.”

“I’ll be there.”

Varric arrived first and slipped into a seat, smiled at him. Lavellan slumped in relief. Well, alright, at least Varric was here.

“Hey Varric,” said Lavellan.

“You don’t have to look like you just arranged your execution, Glowy. I won’t bite.”

“Maybe *you* won’t.”

His smile turned gentle, but he kept up a steady stream of conversation that distracted Lavellan from his nerves— Damn it, how was he so good at this? Probably had a lot of practice at Kirkwall with Hawke and company.

“You think this was a good idea?” Lavellan eventually asked. “The game?”

“It’s always a good idea to gather folks together and play some cards, talk, drink, laugh, lose money...”

He laughed. Varric smiled wider.

“Also,” continued Varric, “it’s good to put aside what’s on your mind for a while.”

“And what’s been on your mind?”

Varric twirled a coin over the table and watched it spin. “Fishermen.”

“Fishermen?”

“Fishermen.” He chuckled. “If you two ever feel like you’re losing against the world, don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re both still here.” He looked at Lavellan and Solas. “This right now? *This* is victory.”

He didn’t elaborate further because more of their friends joined. Lavellan glanced at Solas in question, but he was wearing a soft, contemplative look, so Lavellan left it be for now.

Most of the inner circle showed up, the table growing full. They even had to bring in extra chairs. Some watched from the sidelines, drinking along with them.

Sera and Vivienne were absent.

“This isn’t really Vivienne’s scene,” Varric reassured.

Lavellan just smiled and didn’t ask, “And what about Sera?”

They played for most of the evening. When Leliana joined the game and Josephine sat out (because those two should *never* ever play a round together), she and Lavellan ended up facing off.

“Betting on Red winning,” said Bull. The others agreed and Lavellan shot them all a surly look. Bull shrugged. “She won last time it was just you two.”

“Bastards,” he said, turned to Solas. “You’re on my side, right?”

Solas stared at him, then grabbed a copper and placed it on Leliana’s side of the bets.

“You’re sleeping on the couch,” said Lavellan.

“Only if you win.”

After a gruelling match that left ten dead and fifty injured (not really), Leliana won. The table cheered and Lavellan flicked coins at all of them.

Still, looking at their jubilant faces, warmly lit from the ochre glow of the hearth, he couldn’t help

but smile to himself.

Yeah, *this* was victory.

The night wore on and the others got progressively drunker or tired. Some headed for bed, some conversed with one another.

While Solas, Bull, and Leliana faced off for the final round, Dorian dragged his seat over to Lavellan's side and sat beside him. They watched the game in silence, half-listening to the conversations around them, just enjoying the other's presence.

Eventually, Dorian asked, "Was I a good friend to you?"

Lavellan looked at him. "You were better than good."

Dorian smiled.

"Perhaps I didn't even deserve your friendship," said Lavellan.

"Nonsense. I wouldn't waste my time on those who don't deserve it. I know my worth." Dorian slung an arm around him. "Not a moment goes by where I'm not glad for your friendship."

Lavellan bumped the side of his head against Dorian's. "Likewise. I was... actually worried we wouldn't be friends again."

"Don't be absurd. I'm far too magnetic for you to resist."

He grinned. "You're right. You're just positively attractive."

"That better not have been a pun about magnets."

"What's with this *negativity*?"

He made that fed-up noise of his. Like a groan that had given up halfway through into a sigh but still couldn't quite commit. Lavellan laughed.

Bull slammed his next card down and obnoxiously said, "Ha!" at Solas.

Solas placed his card down, otherwise calm, but he had that glint in his eyes. Lavellan tried to peek at his cards. Solas tilted them away, shot Lavellan a chiding look.

No fun, Lavellan mouthed. Solas ignored him in favour of looking at the card Leliana had played.

After watching them for a few more seconds, he glanced at Dorian again.

"What about you?" Lavellan asked. "How... are you? After everything I've said."

"I've thought about it for a while, very long thought. I've decided that I'd rather not know the events of that future. I'd like to focus on *this* present and *this* future."

"Even if you think you can change some unfavourable outcomes?" The death of his father was coming to mind. Then again, without his passing, Dorian couldn't have become a magister yet.

"I can't say that doesn't tempt me, and that I'm not curious. Because I am. But... It's good to plan for the future, yes, but I think I'd break my head trying to actively change outcomes. That time at Redcliffe was enough for me, thank you. It's truly a marvel how you're still standing."

“I have very good friends.” He threw some of Dorian’s hair over his eyes and laughed at his grumbling. “And very good best friends.”

“Flattery will not save you from ruining the hair!”

At the night’s conclusion, everyone gave each other a warm farewell and went their separate ways.

Mostly everyone. Blackwall lingered, gathered the empty mugs and plates to one side of the table for the cleaners.

“You didn’t drink,” Lavellan noted.

“No,” said Blackwall and smiled. At least, Lavellan assumed he was smiling judging from the eyes. His beard’s gotten quite thick. “Been doing enough of that.”

Lavellan and Solas helped him, wiped the table for good measure too, and once the mugs and plates were taken away, they helped put up the seats. When there was nothing else to be done, they left. Lavellan threw a final look upstairs at where Sera was. Blackwall caught him looking.

“Bit more time for her,” Blackwall said kindly.

“If she packed up and left in the middle of the night, I wouldn’t be surprised either,” said Lavellan.

He chuckled and they stepped back out into the chill of Skyhold’s air. “She wouldn’t. Oh, she’ll be tempted, but she wouldn’t.”

The three of them stood outside the tavern. Lavellan wrapped the cloak tighter around himself, eyes downcast.

“And you?” asked Lavellan. “How are you feeling about all this?”

Blackwall hooked his thumbs around his belt loops, gazed skywards, breaths fogging.

“I still can’t believe it,” he said. “All this magic and the bigger things have always been a little beyond me. I just try to go where I’m needed, do the right thing when I can.” He looked down and shook his head. “And hearing of all those things... The world really is larger than I’ll ever grasp. But all I can think of is that across all of this time, those who’d see others harmed have always existed.”

He looked at Lavellan and Solas.

“And those who couldn’t stand by and watch have also always existed,” Blackwall continued. “Makes my head spin but... it also gives me hope.”

“Oh,” said Lavellan. That... wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

“Be wary,” said Solas softly. “The pursuit of the right thing can blind one to all else. You must take care to not get lost.”

Blackwall nodded. “That’s true. But there’s always a chance to turn around and look for a way back. Or you’ve got folks who can point you to the right path. Sometimes trying’s all we can do.” His gaze grew sombre. “And second chances are probably harder to live with than the first. I’ve been given a new future. I will dedicate it to doing the right thing.”

“And for yourself too, Blackwall,” said Solas. “Do right by yourself, too.”

Blackwall stared at the ground for a while, then he smiled at them.

“Alright. Long as both of you do as well.”

Lavellan shrugged, smiled back. “Three-way promise, why not?”

He was exhausted to the Void and back when they got back to the room. Maybe doing such a large gathering so soon wasn’t advisable, but... he didn’t want to prolong it any more than he already has. A little exhaustion was fine.

“How do you feel?” asked Solas, already fussing to help him out of his scarf and cloak.

But the day wasn’t quite over yet.

Lavellan held Solas’ arm and stilled him. Solas looked at him in question.

“Sit down,” said Lavellan gently. “Come on.”

He eased them both down onto the edge of the bed, Solas now frowning at him in worry.

“Is something the matter?” asked Solas. “Are you alright?”

Lavellan studied him. “Are *you* alright?”

He moved to stand. “I will be alright once you rest—”

Lavellan stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder. “Every time I ask you that, you dodge the question.” He cupped Solas’ cheek, turned his head to look at him. “Vhenan... I am not the only who has had to be courageous these past few days. Really, how are *you*?”

“I am alright.” Too quick of an answer.

“Solas.”

Solas paused. Lavellan softened his gaze and tone.

“Don’t think I’m not noticing what you’re doing,” said Lavellan. Busying himself with taking care of someone else so that he wouldn’t have to think about what was happening with him... Lavellan would know. He’d done it for so long. They both had. “I know it’s... a lot. What you’ve had to divulge, and the weight of it. Void’s sake, you never revealed *any* of this until *two* years later. And even then, you gave me very basic information. I’m just... I’m... *proud* of you, is what I want to say, but that feels condescending. Is that condescending? Oh gods, I hope that’s not condescending.”

Solas held Lavellan’s hand on his cheek, looking at him with a smile in his eyes. “I do not think it condescending.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Well, then, I’m proud of you. And I hope you are, too.” He pressed their foreheads together, the tips of their noses brushing. “You continue to amaze me.”

Solas’ eyes slipped shut and they just stayed there for a moment, Lavellan’s hand on his cheek,

Solas' hand over that, sharing their breaths. But Lavellan kept his eyes open, kept them on Solas. Solas, who'd always had an honest heart, who'd bared it as an act of defiance against a world that had spat on sincerity. Solas, who'd later hidden all of that away, buried beneath the weight of guilt and duty, heart hardening under the strain until it became unrecognisable. And yet, even so, all he'd wanted was to be seen... to be known.

But to be seen and known was a vulnerability. Like letting others hold a blade to his chest.

Lavellan had held a blade to Solas' chest once.

He wouldn't let it go further, this time.

"You did so well," Lavellan whispered, and Solas' brows scrunched, holding back tears. He kissed the space between those brows. "It was brave."

"It was the right thing to do."

"And sometimes, that's the hardest, most frightening thing to do."

Solas bowed his head. His shoulders shook slightly.

Lavellan held him, hoping to be as steady as the stone that had grounded him for all this time.

"I've got you," Lavellan whispered. "You've done well. I've got you..."

Solas pulled Lavellan closer, his tears silent.

He ended up falling asleep on Lavellan's shoulder. Lavellan sighed fondly and kissed his temple, then manoeuvred him into lying down.

In between his duties, Lavellan still found what time he could to sit down and write the condolence letters. He delivered them to Josephine's desk while she was on break.

The door opened behind him. Ah, she was back?

He turned—

Vivienne.

They stared at one another for a second or two, before she wordlessly made her way to the desk and placed a stack of envelopes down. The silence scraped against him like a block of ice. She turned on her heel and walked away.

He clenched his hands beside him, frowning at the floor.

"Nothing's changed," he said.

She stopped walking.

"I'm still me. The person I showed you is me. I wasn't pretending to be someone else."

She looked at him over her shoulder. "Were you not? You were a spirit all along."

He scowled and lifted his chin, squared his shoulders. “Yes. I will not apologise for who and what I am. I’m also a Dalish elf just as much as I’m a spirit of Change.”

“Spirit?” she asked softly. “Or demon?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“You are unstable.”

“I know.”

“What if you lose control?”

“I’ve lived with myself for thousands of years. I know how to keep myself stable.” Did he really?

Her gaze hardened. “Like when you disappeared into the Fade?”

He paused.

That’s not fair, he almost said, but the last thing he wanted to do was whine in front of her.

“So... you’re just going to treat me like I’m liable to explode at any time?” he asked instead. “So that you’re prepared for if it happens?”

She didn’t answer, just kept looking at him. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Do you have a staff?” she asked.

“What?”

Vivienne didn’t elaborate. Lavellan frowned.

“I... do.”

“Have you used it?”

“Sometimes.”

“And?”

“And I’m still getting used to it, I suppose. Solas started teaching me barriers first.”

Vivienne looked away, fixing her sleeves. “I will teach you as well.”

Lavellan stared at her back. “What?”

“Solas may scoff all he wants at Circle methods, but there is still merit to their teachings. If you didn’t believe so, then you would not have relied on Dorian or I for certain matters. I suspect you’ll appreciate having a wider variety of methods to choose from and employ as you wish.”

He kept staring. She finished fixing her sleeve and turned to walk away again.

“I am free the day after the commemorative ceremony,” she said. “Meet me at my balcony in the morning.”

“Wh— Wait. Why are you... Why?”

She raised a delicate brow at him. “Darling, I do not care how old you are. You are still running around flicking magic like an untrained child. You require structure. I would prefer if you did not hurt yourself or others in your attempts to relearn it.”

He scrutinised her. She remained unmoved by his stare.

“Oh,” he murmured after a while. “I see.”

“Do you?”

She didn’t trust him. Not anymore. Gone was the silent approval in her eyes, an approval that maybe he’d been craving, just a little, and had been glad to have. In a way, maybe she was the closest to a motherly figure that he may have had here. Vastly different from Mamae, who was all warm hearth and nurturing hands, fit to teach him to be a protector. Vivienne’s cold steel and iron fist in comparison had taught him to be a soldier within the battlefield and court.

Who was he looking at now?

Maybe she was asking the same question, too.

He’d told her that nothing about him had changed... But maybe that was a lie and she knew it.

Everything had changed.

He looked away.

“Alright,” he murmured. “I’ll meet you then.”

Vivienne turned and walked away again, the heel of her boots striking the stone floors like a metronome.

After three days, the commemorative ceremony began. Several dignitaries arrived. Lavellan gave his speech — a message of sorrow, gratitude, and farewell all in one, and spent a moment of silence for all their fallen soldiers.

After a while, Mother Giselle stepped forward to deliver her own speech.

“These rites are for us,” said Mother Giselle, “just as much as it is for those who have passed. It is important that we put to rest the remnants of them. For us to say our farewells yet keep them in our hearts, and for us to begin the difficult task of stepping forward through our pain. Cherish them, but do not let them become shackles.”

Lavellan paused, gaze sweeping across the faces of his companions. He took in the scene before him, of everyone’s solemnity, of the ghosts who were now walking and wearing the faces of his friends. He glanced at Solas beside him, then back out at the ceremony.

How do you put ghosts to rest?

He wished he knew the answer.

Later that night, he and Solas retreated to their room.

Solas fell asleep first while Lavellan stared at the ceiling, his lover's steady breathing beside him unable to coax him into sleeping.

He looked at Solas, then the ceiling again. Truly, Lavellan was proud of him. He'd come so far, they both have, but... beloved as this Solas was, a version of him had still existed prior to the one now. The one who had fallen to Lavellan's blade. Lavellan had loved him too.

Lavellan had loved everyone from that past too.

Had he begun moving forward? How was he meant to come to terms with their passing when he could still see their faces every day? How was he supposed to bury ghosts who were still alive?

What had Cole said? He should put the ghosts to rest and not them?

Lavellan paused, then sat up slowly, easing Solas' arm off him.

The ghosts weren't them... The ghosts were... coming from him. The ghosts were his memories of them.

Lavellan swung his legs off the bed and sat there for a while, elbows on his thighs.

How should he put memories to rest while still remembering them?

His gaze fell on Dalish blanket over their bed, at the tree-like designs woven into the edges.

"Why do we plant trees when someone dies, Mamae?"

She patted the trunk of the tree in front of her, eyes gentle. His grandmother's tree. "We place the memories in the earth so that we may lay them down to rest, and when the seed is nourished by the love within the memories, it sprouts into a tree. It is a mix of your love and the memories of them, right in front of you. Trees protect and provide for us. And so, our loved ones become our protectors and our providers in turn."

"So... you're giving the memories life?"

Her smile brightened. "Precisely. But also..." She placed her hand on his chest. "You are freeing this heart of yours from the pain. It will be as slow as the growth of a tree, but slowly, and surely, it will happen."

"It won't hurt anymore?"

She paused, then tucked a strand of his hair behind his ear. "Not always. Sometimes, it may still hurt, but it will not drown you."

Lavellan closed his eyes, breathed in, out, then pushed himself up. He scribbled a quick note explaining what he was going to do and where he was going, just so he wouldn't worry Solas, and left it at the bedside table. He pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Solas' lips.

"I'll be back, my Pride," he whispered. He then grabbed his cloak, wrapped it around himself, and left the room.

The Hall was quiet and dim as he made his way through it, and the night-time chill needled into his bones, but he wrapped the cloak tighter around himself to ward it off.

Now then, where could the supplies be...? Maybe the requisition tower?

He visited the requisition tower, picked the lock (and apologised to their Quartermaster), and entered. He rooted around for a while, then found what he was looking for in the gardening section. Drawers filled with seed packets greeted him. He rifled through them. Trees... trees... aha! He squinted at the label, but it'd been smudged. Ah, well. The point wasn't really to grow them. It was more the symbolic burying.

Lavellan grabbed a wheelbarrow, threw the seed packets and gardening tools into it, and wheeled them out.

When he was halfway through the bailey, a soft voice called out.

"Inquisitor?"

Lavellan looked over his shoulder and saw one of the guards. He waved.

"Just doing some gardening," he said. "Don't mind me."

The poor soldier looked boggled. "It's... past midnight?"

"Yeah."

"Oh... okay."

Lavellan wheeled his barrow along, past the gates, past the bridge and ruined watch tower, and stopped at the path to the bridge. He frowned at the land. Nothing was going to grow here for a while. Again, no matter.

He rolled up his sleeves and got to work beneath the moonlight.

Fourteen seeds. Twelve for the inner circle, one for Clan Lavellan, one for those in Elvhenan. He planted the seeds along the side of the path, seven on either side.

Corypheus had once threatened to line the path with the piked heads of his friends, to line the path with death.

Well, Lavellan was going to line it with life.

Even if they weren't going to grow, he still planted them as if they would. Here they would lay along the path to home. With every seed he placed in the soil, he allowed himself to remember its respective person, no matter the pain, and he would murmur the Dalish funerary rites as he buried it. For every seed, he repeated the process. The night was cold, but the gardening gloves and his cloak provided him with some warmth.

Solas and Cassandra's seeds were closest to the castle.

Lavellan placed Solas' seed down last.

"I forgive you," murmured Lavellan. "Rest now."

Lavellan watered the mounds once he was done and looked out at his work, taking a deep breath in, and letting it out slowly.

He felt lighter already. And exhausted. He sat and leaned back against one of the large chunks of stone that had fallen from the ruined watch tower and called on his magic to warm himself. It helped that he already knew how to craft a barrier. A simple warming spell was of a similar mechanism.

After a few tries, he was successful, and he warded off the Frostback's chill. Should last for a good handful of hours.

He wrapped his cloak tighter around him and leaned his head back against the stone, stared at the stars. All done. He should make his way back now. Maybe wash himself.

His eyes dipped shut.

Solas would give him that disgruntled look if he crawled in covered in soil...

"..quisitor?"

Lavellan jolted awake, then groaned as he felt the soreness in his neck. He blinked his grogginess away, squinting up at the figure standing over him. It was a tanned man in a humble attire, wearing a straw hat that was fraying at the edges, a red ribbon wrapped above its brim. Farmer...? He looked like he was around Varric's age, but his face was more youthful, if a little sunburned.

"Inquisitor?" asked the (possibly) farmer. "What are you doing sleeping out here? It's too cold this early in the morning, you'll get sick!"

Lavellan blinked. The sky was lightening, not quite bright yet. Dawn? His eyes felt scratchy, his ass numb.

"Um," he rasped, "gardening."

"Gardening? Oh, these beautiful trees?"

Trees?

There were golden flowers swaying above them.

Lavellan blinked, then bolted upright, gawking.

Along the path to Skyhold, an arcade of trees stood, boasting hanging chains of golden flowers amid the emerald foliage.

Were these... the trees he'd planted last night? But— The soil had been tainted by the darkspawn! And no tree could grow this fast in such a short amount of time.

He counted the trees. Fourteen. Exact amount he'd planted.

"Laburnums," said the farmer. "Beautiful, aren't they? I have to say, it was such a treat to see. Ah, probably good to warn any young'uns from eating anything from the tree. Poisonous."

"*Poisonous?*"

“Not severely. Would make you sick if you consume anything from it though. Just put up a few signs warning not to eat. They could be fenced to stop animals from having a chew.”

Lavellan faced the farmer again. There was a wagon behind him filled with crates of produce.

“Ah.” The farmer gestured at the wagon. “From my farm!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” he said distractedly. Trees? How? “Thank you.”

The farmer smiled, but it faded, replaced by concern. “Are you alright, Inquisitor? You look a mite tired. Perhaps get yourself to a bed.”

“Yeah... Yeah. Maybe I’m dreaming,” he muttered.

“Oh, before you go.” The farmer reached into his wagon and pulled out a small bucket full of strawberries. He passed them onto Lavellan. “For you, Inquisitor! Already washed and ready to eat. Everything in that bucket is yours. Even the bucket is yours!”

“I— Oh, thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

The farmer tipped his straw hat, smile returning, his eyes as brown and warm as the earth. “It’s the least I could do. Now then, to deliver these!” He climbed back onto the wagon and snapped the reins, urged the horse onwards. Lavellan blinked at the retreating wagon, then at the trees.

How in the world was he supposed to explain these...?

He put a disbelieving hand against a nearby trunk. It remained solid beneath his touch, the golden flowers dancing in the wind above him.

Nothing was supposed to grow.

He looked at the bucket of strawberries, red and inviting, He bit into one, paused.

Holy shit. These strawberries were *good*.

He stood there snacking on them for a few more minutes, before he returned to his wheelbarrow and wheeled everything back, casting one last befuddled look over his shoulder.

He returned to his quarters just in time to see Solas reading the note.

“You would not fucking believe what just happened,” said Lavellan and Solas started.

“Oh, you’ve returned.” He looked at the bucket of strawberries. Lavellan offered one.

“Try these first, they’re so good.”

He took one and bit into it. His brows raised.

“Right?” asked Lavellan, placing the bucket down at his desk. “Okay, that’s not what I meant to tell you. Here, come here.” He led Solas to the balcony and pointed at the path to Skyhold now lined with the laburnum trees.

Solas frowned. “Did you use magic to grow them?”

“No, I just put the seeds down! I swear! It was more symbolic than anything. I wasn’t actually trying to grow trees, much less that fast! And that soil’s been ruined by the darkspawn, it shouldn’t be able to grow anything for at least a few more years.”

“Perhaps you have caught the attention of a spirit and it has helped you grow the trees.”

“Maybe... Probably still a good idea to check if the trees aren’t secretly weapons of mass destruction.”

“The weapon of mass destruction is on our couch.”

Lavellan paused, then cackled. “That’s still funny.”

After that entire ordeal with the trees, Lavellan took the strawberries and transferred them to a bowl, then paused as he noticed a glint beneath the fruits. He nudged the strawberries aside.

At the very bottom of the bucket, a small chunk of raw amethyst glimmered.

Lavellan fished it out hesitantly, eyes widening. It was no bigger than a babe’s fist. What... the hell? He turned it in his hands, shared a boggled look with Solas.

“I’ve got to return this,” he said. “Hold on.”

He gripped it tight and rushed out of the bedroom, searched for the farmer from this morning, questioned the person in charge of accepting shipments. But the farmer had long gone.

Lavellan stood baffled in the middle of the courtyard, raw amethyst in hand.

Outside the castle, the golden flowers swayed cheerily in the wind.

Chapter End Notes

whew. not entirely happy with this chap, but i'll just come back to it when my brain isn't a pile of mush

and no, the farmer isn't dirthamen (in all seriousness, not trying to mislead you this time) haha

solas: if i keep myself moving, i will avoid falling into a bottomless pit of despair
lavellan: babe--

Where gold is found

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

we're homeward bound

Good news, the trees were *not* weapons of mass destruction. They were just trees.

Bad news, Lavellan still had no idea how they'd grown. Some people said the trees were a miracle from the Maker. Others said it was just a surprise from the Inquisitor and that he'd had his ancient elven friends do their magic to give everyone something nice after the battle.

Lavellan wisely said nothing and just allowed it to be a mystery.

"How'd you do it, really?" Varric asked for the fiftieth time during breakfast.

"Love," said Lavellan, still puzzled over the farmer and the amethyst. He hadn't known what to do with it, so he'd tucked it away in a safe place until he could figure it out.

"Glowy, please."

"And friendship."

Varric turned to Abelas. "Did you help him with it, Sunny?"

Ellana snorted at the nickname while Abelas stared at him strangely.

"I did not," said Abelas.

"Damn. Chuckles?"

"Determination, perhaps," said Solas, not sparing him a look.

"Sunny and Chuckles?" asked Ellana. "We have got to talk about how you dole out nicknames."

After breakfast, Lavellan attended to a few more Inquisitorial duties and discussed the Satinalia preparations since Firstfall was in two weeks (having already decided what presents he would give the inner circle). He then prepared himself and returned to the Hall, staring up at Vivienne's balcony.

Magic lesson time.

"Here goes," he said to himself, took a deep breath in, and made his way up.

Solas, who'd been sitting by the Hall's fireplace, stood and followed. He fell into step beside Lavellan. Lavellan eyed him.

"I'm not about to walk into my execution," Lavellan said amusedly.

"And yet, you look as though you are."

"You don't have to come with. I'll be fine."

“I’m certain.”

Solas made no move to leave.

Lavellan didn’t argue further.

Vivienne was sitting on her chaise when they arrived, legs crossed and reading reports. She looked up and uncrossed her legs.

“Good, you’re here,” she said and stood. Her eyes narrowed at Solas. “And why have you come?”

Solas met her narrow-eyed gaze coolly. “Supervision.”

She stared Solas down, the tension between them icier than usual.

“So long as you do not interfere,” she eventually said and walked past them. “Come along. Inquisitor, did you bring your staff?”

“Yes,” said Lavellan.

She led them to one of Skyhold’s undercrofts. Lavellan’s brows raised at the targets on the walls and a variety of markings on the ground. They stood in the middle of the room while Solas sat in a corner, watching. When did she set these up?

“Show me your staff,” she said.

Lavellan took out the short branch and elongated it, golden light glimmering within the wood, its end curling and flaring in layers. He presented it to her. She appraised it with a hum.

“Too volatile for my liking,” she muttered, “but I suppose it would suit you better. Show me your barrier.”

Lavellan gathered his magic and did so. She took out a pocket watch from her robe.

“Hold it,” she said.

He held it until he couldn’t. He leaned against his staff after, winded.

She hummed at her watch and snapped it shut. “Decent,” she said, and he smiled. “For a twelve-year-old.” His smile fell.

“Thanks, Vivienne,” he said dryly.

She tucked her watch back into her robe. “Which branch of magic did you specialise in?”

“Shapeshifting.”

“And how about combat? Any affinities for an element?”

“Just the Fade itself. But if I had to choose...” He probably couldn’t say blood. No, he definitely shouldn’t say blood. Next preference then. “Ice.”

She nodded and gestured at the target. “Very well. Today, let us test your control.”

And that was how magic lessons with Vivienne began with Solas supervising. For two weeks, every day, at the same time and place, they would meet for an hour of lessons. She was strict, no-nonsense, and structured. Lavellan was briefly reminded of Thalamya and old Warleader Hanathir. It was... almost a comfort, that structure. And surprisingly, Solas and Vivienne didn't argue as much as Lavellan had feared they would. But the tension between them remained.

Vivienne never once stood with her back to Solas.

Lavellan wasn't sure if Solas noticed (he probably did), but he wasn't about to bring it up any time soon.

Within two weeks, he could hold a barrier for longer. Still not as flexible or sturdy as it had once been, but better than nothing. He could summon a fire and keep it alive, he could throw spikes of ice and build a wall of it, he could create a mine of lightning. The basics.

Today, Vivienne changed locations.

"Not here," she said and led the way back out to the Hall. Dorian joined them halfway through.

"Might I join?" asked Dorian. "I'd like to see your talents for myself."

"So long as you do not distract him," said Vivienne.

"I will be well-behaved!"

Dorian kept up a stream of chatter the entire way. Vivienne led them out the gates, passing beneath the arcade of laburnums that had now been fenced off, signs warning not to eat anything from the trees piked into the soil. Solas raised a hand and brushed his fingers against a low-hanging chain of flowers. Lavellan smiled.

They took a turn into a field of snow and kept walking until they were out of sight of the castle and the path to it.

Vivienne faced him. "Here will be fine. We will need a large space."

"Oh?" he asked. "What for?"

"Fade-stepping."

His eyes lit up.

She explained for a while, then Solas interrupted, and she interrupted him, and the interruptions grew competitive until the two were throwing passive-aggressive comments at one another. Dorian slung an arm around Lavellan again and shepherded him away from them. Neither noticed.

"Let's save you from the two dragons, yes?" asked Dorian. Lavellan laughed. "All work and no play make for a poor use of time. Let's have a little fun, shall we?"

So he and Dorian practiced instead. They used the lines from the impressions of their Fade-stepping footprints to make art in the snow, filling in the finer details with the end of their staff. Lavellan hummed happily as he filled in the feathers for the raven he'd drawn into the snow. Vergala perched on his shoulder and tilted her head at it.

"Ugly," she cawed.

“Stop judging,” he muttered. “Shoo!” He waved his hand at her and she flew off, made a noise that sounded like a mocking laugh.

He felt Dorian staring. Come on, it wasn’t that bad, was it?

But when Lavellan looked at him, it was to a contemplative expression. No, not quite contemplative. The same look Dorian had worn after their argument in the Dales.

“Is something wrong?” Lavellan asked

Dorian started. “Oh! Begging your pardon, I just...” He leaned against his staff, still with that heavy, troubled look. “You... were a slave, yes?”

Ah.

“I was,” Lavellan said gently. “Though treated much better than most.”

“Still a slave.”

“Yes.”

Dorian stared at the snow, Solas and Vivienne’s arguing faint in the background.

“Maker, the things I’ve said—” He rubbed his face. “I deserved a punch.”

“Probably,” Lavellan said, smiling, “but you know that’s not my style. Good thing, too. Would’ve bruised such a pretty face.”

“This pretty face has seen better days. My skin gets awfully dry out here, Mahanon.” His playful expression faded, replaced again by that sombreness. He stared at the raven Lavellan had drawn. “I... have another question. If I may ask.”

“About?”

“Dirthamen.”

Lavellan gripped his staff tighter. “...It depends. What about?”

“I’m— I’m not sure... Was he good to you?”

Lavellan looked up at the sky in thought. Good to him?

“In the beginning, better than most to their slaves,” he said. “But he was still complicit and possessive, and I won’t deny that he had his cruel moments. However, everyone has the capacity to change for the better. He did his best to make up for his wrongdoings, and I saw in his eyes and actions a man that desperately wanted to be kind in a world and family that has shaped him against it. I’d say it was a miracle that he didn’t turn out like the rest of his family, but that would discredit his tenacity.”

He glanced at Solas and Vivienne *still* bickering. Of course they would be able to distract each other from the lesson for this long.

“And it never hurts to have a friend's support,” said Lavellan.

“Solas was rather vague about Dirthamen, but it sounded as though they were close.”

“They were *lethallin* to one another. To spill one’s blood is to spill the other’s and all that. Maybe if I hadn’t been such a brick then and if time had permitted it, then... maybe we could have...”

He became too aware of how light his inner pockets were, bereft of the weight of the grounding stone and metal earring. How could he have lost both? That earring was his last physical reminder of Dirthamen, and the stone was irreplaceable. He’d tried alternatives — smooth wood, other stones, sometimes metal — but none of them could fit as nicely in his hand.

He chewed on his lip and returned to working on the raven. “Why do you ask?”

Dorian returned to his own drawing as well. It was a scenery. It looked a little like Minrathous. “Because he’s important to you. And I suppose I... wanted to know what it was like trying to help the slaves after being the perpetrator for so long. How had he felt? What did he do? All those lovely questions.”

Ah, yes. There *were* similarities between their positions, weren’t there?

“Suppose I could try asking one of the gates to the Black City,” Dorian mused. “One of them is bound to be his. A little door-to-door venture, knocking on each mirror.”

Lavellan laughed. “Because that place is just prime tourist destination.”

“Precisely. We should drum up a business! A guided tour of the fabled gates. Try not to mind the field full of demons and Void or the mirrors housing frightening elven sovereigns! All part of its natural charm, really.”

Lavellan grinned, some of his grey mood lifting. Dorian’s answering chuckle told him that that had been the intended result.

They finished their drawing, then continued with another, only to be stopped by a clipped, “Inquisitor.”

Dorian and Lavellan grimaced like two boys about to be lectured. Lavellan faced Vivienne, who was giving them an unimpressed look. Solas was appraising their artworks instead, smiling.

Vivienne sighed and shook her head. “Never mind. It seems you have grasped the basics. It has been an hour. We can return.”

Lavellan shrank his staff with a sheepish chuckle and hid it back into his coat. They made their way back to Skyhold with Dorian’s arm slung around Lavellan’s shoulder as he bragged to Solas about being a better teacher. Lavellan agreed.

“He just tried to feel me up when he last taught me,” Lavellan bemoaned. “Unfair use of his authority!”

“For shame, Solas,” said Dorian.

Solas rubbed his eyes.

Lavellan laughed.

On the dawn of Satinalia, Lavellan woke up early, the room still dim. He went to his desk, opened the locked drawer, and took out the presents he'd made for the inner circle with Dagna's help. They were small, stylised carvings of ravens, each just a little smaller than a plum, with a crystal fragment embedded on each of their backs. Like the communication crystals in Elvhenan. He'd shown Dagna how to make those crystals out of Iyrium and Calpernia's memory crystal, and then, he'd enchanted the carvings with a linking and navigational spell.

The carvings would function like flares. A signal for help. All they had to do was say, "Halani," into the raven, and everyone's crystals would pulse with a golden light. If they were in dire straits and couldn't talk, they could smash the crystal. Everyone else's crystal would pulse red, then. The pulse would steadily grow stronger into a glow when the beak was pointed at the raven of the person who needed help. Not unlike the spell he'd used for Dirthamen's earring. And just in case they couldn't remember the Elvish word, Lavellan had carved it using Common letters into the underside of the raven.

Problem was, it wouldn't be able to differentiate between distance and elevations, so it could be troublesome in caves and multi-storeyed buildings, and you couldn't tell how close you were. It also couldn't indicate if there were multiple people who'd activated it at once. There wasn't much he could do about those. Maybe he'd find a solution in the future. For now, these would have to do as a last resort.

He wrapped them and packed them into boxes, slipped a set of written instructions into each one, then put the boxes in a bag. By the time he was finished, it was already dawn.

Solas stirred, waking. Lavellan grabbed Solas' box and made his way over, sat on Solas' side of the bed with a small smile.

"Morning," Lavellan whispered.

Solas blinked slowly, then returned the smile. "You are up early." He glanced at the box on Lavellan's lap and pushed himself up, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "What is that?"

Lavellan offered it to him. "Happy Satinalia."

"Ah, ma serannas, vhenan." He opened the box with a smile and unwrapped the raven carving, tilted his head at it. "I sense magic within. Enchanted?"

Lavellan explained its mechanisms and Solas hummed.

"I see," said Solas. "This is a very thoughtful and practical gift. I am sure it will bring the others comfort. Who do you plan to give them to?"

"The Inquisition's inner circle, as well as Abelas and Ellana. I also made five more spares for whoever I think to give it to in the future. I was wondering if I could make it more specific so that we know who's calling for help, but it ended up being too complex. I'm not working with the right materials and equipment for the crystal, and I'm not at that level of strength anymore. Just had to make do."

Lavellan stood and stretched. Now then, time to prepare for Satinalia. There would be a Chant for the Andrastians to attend this morning, then he'd make his appearance and speech. He could probably squeeze in the gifts before then.

He may have to sneak the gift in for some people if they were busy or didn't want to see him...

"What mask will you wear for tonight?" asked Solas.

Lavellan smiled at him. "Not telling."

"Are you up to no good again?"

"When have I ever been up to no good, ma fen'lin?"

Solas sighed and returned his carved raven to its box.

"What about you?" asked Lavellan. "Wearing any masks?"

"Not telling," he echoed.

Lavellan wagered that it was going to be a wolf... Or was that too obvious? Solas did like subverting expectations...

He gave Josephine hers first in her office. She smiled after his explanation.

"Halani," she tested, and her raven glowed. Lavellan opened one of the boxes, the raven's crystal inside pulsing. He pointed its beak at her raven. The pulse became a glow. "My, this is impressive, Inquisitor. Thank you very much! I hope I pronounced the Elvish correctly."

"You did," he reassured. "I... taught you a bit of Elvish. Back then. You were quite good. Would you like to learn?"

"Oh, are you certain? I was under the impression that the Dalish are very careful with sharing their culture with outsiders."

He nodded. "Some clans. But ours has always been open, so I'm not fussed about it. And I've always been of the opinion that our culture should be shared. With the right people, of course."

"Well, I am honoured that you think I am the right person." She placed the raven down and smiled. "Learning your language sounds most lovely. I look forward to it!"

Lavellan smiled back. He'd enjoyed teaching her. Her presence had always been calming.

His smile softened. "Jo... in that future, you'd taught me many methods on how to calm myself during moments of distress. They helped me a lot, especially after time reversed. I just wanted to say thank you."

"Oh, Inquisitor..." She stood and embraced him. He hugged her back, smelled the familiar perfume she'd dab on her neck and the fragrant oils in her hair. "You are most welcome. I am certain the me of that time would also be relieved to hear that she was of help."

"Lifesaver, you," he mumbled.

"All in a day's work," she said and somehow managed to make it sound both teasing and kind.

His next stop was Leliana. She was in the rookery, staring at a letter on the table.

“I feel like every time I come here, there’s a letter filled with earth-shattering information on your desk,” he said.

“I have been elected Divine.”

He sat across her. “See?”

She rubbed her eyes. “Oh, Maker...”

“Have you told anyone?”

“You would be the first. I only just received the letter this morning. But I’m certain the news will travel fast.” She peered at him. “You never did mention who became Divine in that past future.”

“I tried to omit details that may have had a chance of coming true. That future isn’t set in stone, and I didn’t want anyone to get too hung up on it.” He fiddled with the box in his hand. “That being said... Yes, you were the Divine then, too.”

Leliana interlocked her fingers and rested them on the table, frowning in thought.

“What kind of Divine was I?” she asked.

Lavellan’s lips pinched tight. “In one word?”

She nodded.

“Ruthless.”

Her expression grew grim. “How so?”

“You governed with fear. Opposing voices were silenced with steel. You brought your changes with a heavy hand, and people would whisper that you have stained the Sunburst Throne.”

She paused, then sighed. “I wish I could say that surprises me.”

He placed a gentle hand over hers. “But like I said: that future does not dictate your actions. Back then, when we confronted Sister Natalie, I told you to stand down. You didn’t. I tried again this time. When you stepped back and let her live... I knew something had shifted. I was so rattled.” He chuckled. “But it wasn’t that you were a completely different person like I’d feared. Simply that you’ve nurtured a different part of yourself.”

“And for the better, one would hope.”

“It’s not my place to say whether it’s for the better. But I’ll ask you this: do you feel like you’ve lost the core of who you are?”

Leliana looked down in thought.

Then, she looked up, gaze firm. “No.”

“Are you happy with who you are?”

“I am.”

He smiled. "Well then, there we have it."

"There we have it," she murmured. "It is a frightening thing, isn't it? Knowing that a version of yourself had lost their way."

"I understand." He truly did... "But you know, I don't think you completely lost yourself then. During the final battle, when I stabbed Cassandra" —it was getting easier to say— "you were hidden on a hillside, an arrow nocked and ready to fly. I looked at you and I begged with my gaze. I wanted you to kill me before I could hurt anybody else."

"But I didn't."

"But you didn't." He drew his hand back. "You couldn't."

She stared at the table, silent. Then, she asked, "Tabris... Did she... How was she?"

"She returned and stayed by your side. I lost track of her during the final battle, though."

Her shoulders slackened. "Then there is a possibility that I will see her again soon."

He smiled. "Indeed." He brought out the box and placed it in front of her. "Now then, I believe I still have a Satinalia present to give."

He continued making the rounds, the baileys steadily growing crowded from newcomers and stalls being set up. He couldn't find some of the inner circle, so he just left the gifts in safe places with a note saying it was from him.

When he checked the garden, he found Cassandra there, reading.

She looked up when he sat beside her.

"Happy Satinalia," he said and gave her the box.

"Oh, thank you." She took it with a smile and opened it. He gave the same explanation he'd given the others and she nodded.

"I didn't want it accidentally activating if someone says 'help' in passing conversation," he said, "so I thought I'd make it the Elvish word."

"How long did it take to make these?"

"Two weeks. People kept making me rest, so I had time."

"I am glad you have been resting." She placed the raven back in the box and placed it on top of the book on her lap. It was unlabelled. She caught him looking and cleared her throat awkwardly. "It is... Varric's writing. He has been continuing Swords and Shields when he has the time, and he gives the pages to me."

"That's so sweet."

Cassandra laughed. "Sweet is not the word I would use. He delights in mortifying me."

“That too. But I bet he also appreciates your engagement. He’s just killing two birds with one stone as always.”

“All to flatter his ego,” she said dryly. “It is quite possibly larger than him.”

“He’s great and he knows it.”

They sat together for a while, enjoyed the warmth of the sun on their face.

“They’ll be singing the Chants soon, won’t they?” he asked.

“Yes. It’ll be led by one of the Mothers from the Grand Cathedral.” She looked at him. “I hear Leliana has been chosen Divine.”

“She’s a little overwhelmed.” He had a feeling the Mothers were going to ask him to announce it later.

“With the Maker and Andraste’s grace, I am certain she will be fine,” said Cassandra. “I believe Leliana can bring the necessary changes to the Chantry.”

He smiled and leaned back against the bench. “Me too.”

Although, on the topic of Andraste...

“You know,” Lavellan started, “before I was reborn, I was roaming the Fade as a spirit for a while. You wouldn’t believe who I met.”

Cassandra glanced at him in question.

“Andraste.”

She sat up. “Truly?”

“Briefly, while she was dreaming. Although, I did watch her battles too. I was drawn to the forces of change she was bringing about.”

“What was she like?”

He looked down. “She... wept at her pyre.” He glanced at Cassandra, met her sorrowful gaze with a small smile. “But she also laughed with her friends. She danced in the rain, she fought for what she believed in with a roar, she was... a person. Lively and fierce, even if she carried a deep sense of melancholy.”

Lavellan gazed skywards, listened to the songbirds in the trees warbling their songs.

“I met her when I was close to becoming Entropy,” he murmured. “She encouraged me to find my lights in the waking world. I told her I was afraid of crossing.”

“What did she say?”

He smiled at her.

“She told me, ‘Must it always be night? The dawn will come.’”

Cassandra looked away and watched the garden, quiet for a while.

Then, she smiled back at him, gaze warm.

“Thank you,” she said.

One person left for the raven.

He saw bags of cookies being sold at one of the stalls and stopped, considered them.

Lavellan made his way to Sera’s door with the newly bought bag of cookies and his present in hand. He expected the door to be closed as always.

The door was open.

Sera was perched on the edge of the roof outside her window. He took a deep breath in and walked towards the open window, knocked against the glass.

“Sera?” he asked gently. “Can I join you?”

She didn’t answer, but she pulled her knees to her chest and rested her chin on them. Well, it wasn’t a *fuck off*, so he’d take it.

He walked out through the window, immediately accosted by the faint and wonderful scent of bird shit.

Lavellan sat beside her and placed the present down beside him, made sure it wouldn’t slip off. He opened the bag of cookies, took one for himself, and offered the bag to her. She eyed it. He chewed on his cookie, kept his gaze on the courtyard below.

She snatched the bag out of his hand. He bit back a smile.

They ate their cookie quietly. *Cookies*, in Sera’s case. She’d gobble one down in three angry bites.

She gave the bag back to him. There was one cookie left. He ate it.

Once he was finished, he dusted his hands off and offered Sera the box. Her brows scrunched.

“Satinalia gift,” he explained.

For a moment, he feared that she’d turn it away, but she took and opened it. Slower than when she’d torn into the cookies. When the raven was revealed, he explained what it was, dreading what she’d say about the fact that the activation word was in Elvish, but she said nothing about it. She said nothing at all. Just kept staring at it.

He wrung and twisted the ends of his scarf.

Maybe he should leave her be for now.

He moved to push himself up—

“Those cookies were rubbish,” she said.

He blinked. “You ate all but two of them.”

“Yeah. Still rubbish. Let’s just make our own next time.”

Lavellan paused, before his heart soared slightly. He smiled. “Sure. Just don’t put more sugar while I’m not looking.”

She blew a raspberry. “Put sugar up yours.”

After they sang the Chant, Lavellan came and delivered his speech, announced that Leliana was now the Divine, then announced the official start of the festivities. He made his way to the Hall to attend the formal banquet with the dignitaries from all over Thedas, but Solas intercepted him at the door.

“Might I have a moment of your time?” Solas asked with a smile, offering his hand.

He took his hand and smiled back. “Of course.”

Solas led him to the rotunda’s doors, then slipped behind him before they could enter, covering Lavellan’s eyes with his hands.

Lavellan smiled. “Okay...”

He let Solas guide him into the rotunda, tracked the steps in his head and deduced that they were now standing near the table. Solas turned him. Was he going to show Lavellan the final fresco? That was it, wasn’t it? His heart skipped.

Solas had finished it... Last time, it’d been nothing but a hazy sketch of dragon felled by a sword. Lavellan had wondered then what it would have looked like completed.

“Ready?” asked Solas.

Lavellan nodded.

Solas removed his hands and revealed the fresco. Lavellan’s eyes widened, lips parting.

It wasn’t the dragon.

The golden arch from the Arbor Wilds fresco transitioned into the golden flowers of the laburnum tress, the arcade of them framing the final fresco like a tunnel. At the end of the laburnum tunnel, at the centre of the piece, was Skyhold with a stylised sun rising behind it, the rays slicing through a dark and murky sky. The path to the castle was a simple gradient of dark colours to guide the eye.

It was different.

“It’s beautiful,” Lavellan breathed.

“I wished to give these walls something more than regret, and I was struck with the inspiration when we were returning to Skyhold after your lesson with Vivienne. Walking through the laburnums, I saw the castle awaiting us at its end. This is the first sight that visitors will encounter. Memorials of the past guiding to a safe harbour that you have built.”

He smiled, aglow with so much light within. “Technically, you built it. This *is* your castle.”

“You were the one to breathe warmth into *our* castle.” Solas took Lavellan’s hands in his, pressed their foreheads together. “Our home.”

Lavellan closed his eyes.

It was different.

He pressed a soft and loving kiss to Solas’ lips.

Chapter End Notes

The mural has changed! The future has changed!!

Satinalia at night shenanigans up next! One year later haha.

Lavellan Abelas
Sun-related nicknames

The business of catching ravens

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

offers in the dark

When night fell and Lavellan was relieved of his Inquisitorial duties, he went with Ellana to her room and retrieved the mask he'd stashed away there. No fun in letting Solas find out what his mask was going to be.

The mask itself was nondescript, its material unable to be determined in a low light, covering his whole face. He'd left the raven cloak in his quarters. Too recognisable.

"What's your plan for tonight?" asked Ellana, slipping on a half-mask rich with Dalish patterns.

"Doing what ravens do best."

"Which is?"

He grinned and shrugged on a plain cloak. "Being a menace."

Lavellan stood on the battlements, watched the celebrations below him with a soft smile, the wind threatening to pull his hood off. Despite the night, the baileys had been lit up with fires and the occasional orbs of magelight, people's chatter and the mouth-watering aromas of stall food mixing in the air. He spotted a few of his friends milling about, some people ducking in and out of the tavern and Great Hall. He even spotted Alexius slowly making his way through the festivities, being supported and accompanied by his two apprentices. Lavellan's smile saddened.

Smoke flashed in his periphery.

"Here we are again," murmured Lavellan, removing his mask for Cole's benefit.

Cole stood beside him. "I had a pie."

"Oh! How was it?"

"Sighs in stolen silences, gazes shy. He wanted to tell her she had flour on her nose. The pie was nice."

"How cute. Does she like him back?"

"She thinks he looks good when he carries sacks of flour on his shoulder."

"Ah yes, feats of strength. That'd do it."

A gaggle of children ran squealing across the courtyard. One of the adults yelled at them.

“How have you been, Cole?” asked Lavellan. “We haven’t seen each other in a while.”

“There were a lot of people wishing, wounded, waiting. The nothingness scared them. I helped. Some forgot, some didn’t, couldn’t, shouldn’t. I help by leaving them their favourite food or showing them to someone who can help better. The trees also helped. Life, not ruin.” He looked at Lavellan. “They helped you, too.”

Lavellan glanced at the faint silhouettes of the laburnums in the distance.

“I still don’t know how they grew,” said Lavellan.

Cole tilted his head, the brim of his hat obscuring his eyes. “They say he’s the carpenter, but he’s the house.”

He vanished. Lavellan stared at the empty spot, then sighed. Maybe he’d figure it out another day. For now, he wore his mask again and made his way to the tavern.

It was packed inside. He spotted at least ten other cloaked and masked figures, so he blended right in. Varric, as usual, was hosting a large game of Wicked Grace. Was he wearing the same mask from last year? Probably.

Lavellan wove his way through the throng, dodged ale splashes and avoided being jostled, and reached for the coin bag hanging from his belt. He stood behind Varric.

“How rowdy of a table can you handle?” asked Lavellan and Varric jumped, looked behind him.

“Maker’s balls,” said Varric. “I bet I know who you are.”

“Then bet.”

He barked out a laugh. “I’ve worked games in Kirkwall’s Lowtown. That should tell you enough about how much rowdy I can handle.”

“Good.”

Lavellan emptied the bag onto the table and gold coins poured out. The players exclaimed.

“Can I introduce a new move, Master Tethras?” asked Lavellan.

He threw his hands up, reaching for the quill and paper. “Hell, why not!”

Lavellan leaned his elbow on Varric’s shoulder, addressing the players. “A special Satinalia move. I’m going to call it... hm... Raven’s Ruse.” He explained the new rule while Varric dutifully wrote it down and the players murmured. Lavellan ended it with a cheery, “There’s ten gold coins in that pile. Have fun!”

He slipped away and disappeared into the crowd, keeping an eye on them from the corner. It didn’t take long for the table to devolve into hollers and hurled accusations. Varric curled up in laughter, fist thumping lightly on the table, while Lavellan threw his head back and cackled.

“Having fun?” asked Bull, sidling up to him, two tankards in hand. His mask was dangling from his horns.

“The fun’s only just begun,” said Lavellan. “How’d you recognise me?”

“The way you stand.”

“You scare me sometimes.”

“You scare me more, Mercy.”

“Very good.” He looked at Bull’s mask. “Wrong place for a mask, I think.”

“Pain in the ass to keep taking it off when I want to drink.” He shrugged and sculled one of the tankards. Lavellan eyed the dragon tooth necklace dangling from his neck and smiled behind the mask.

“Nice necklace,” he said.

“You sneaky fuck. You and Dorian.”

“Is Dorian wearing his?”

Bull laughed. “It was too big to be a necklace for him. So he’s just got it in a safe place. He was pretty huffed about it.”

“Had a rant?”

“Obviously. Said dragons should have had the courtesy of having smaller teeth.”

“I’m sure the dragons will take that into consideration. Hey, have you seen Solas, by any chance?”

Bull sipped at one of the tankards, said nothing.

“Ah,” said Lavellan. “You’re his accomplice, are you?”

“That implies I’m helping him, and that he’s up to something. We’re just innocent guys.”

“Simply being complicit makes you an accomplice.”

“That so? Alright, I can be *your* accomplice. I bet you’re going to be running around again and people are going to be looking for you. And people will ask me.”

Lavellan paused, considering. “You’re going to double-agent, aren’t you?”

“Yep. I’ll be on your side, obviously.”

“That’s what they all say.” He shrugged. “Deal. What’s your price?”

“Three casks of Golden Scythe.”

“Steep. Alright. Pleasure doing business with you.”

After leaving Varric’s table in shambles from betrayals and greed, Lavellan slipped away from the crowded tavern and continued his mischief. He even asked Vergala to help him with some of his ploys, all while he kept an eye out for Solas since he’d pulled off his disappearing act again.

It didn’t take long for Find the Inquisitor to ensue. Someone stopped him while he was skulking around on the battlements.

“Are you the Inquisitor?” asked the man.

Lavellan tilted his head and gave the customary answer.

“What’s an Inquisitor?”

“It’s him! Get his mask!”

More people burst out of the watchtower behind and ahead of Lavellan. Someone lunged for him. He dodged, wove his way in between everyone’s grabbing hands, and dashed off with a laugh, disappearing into the crowd filled with other cloaked and masked individuals.

He helped in the kitchen for a while and delivered food to the Hall, but one of the kitchen hands kept squinting at him, so he left. His next stop was the garden, where he found Asunara and Abelas seated on a bench. Abelas had no mask, a book in hand. They looked up at Lavellan’s arrival.

“And what are you up to?” asked Abelas.

“Being a headache,” said Lavellan. “What about you two? Not partaking in the festivities?”

“No. I am attempting to practice reading Common. I speak it fluently enough, but my reading requires work.”

“He is upset that a single vowel character can have different phonetic sounds,” said Asunara. She’d been around for a while now, collecting the memories around Skyhold, likely still deciding on Lavellan’s offer. She’d stay out of sight or disappear from people’s memories if they proved hostile or unwelcoming.

“How can you determine whether ‘a’ is said as *ey*, *ah*, or *ahh*?” Abelas muttered.

“Context and memory,” said Lavellan.

Abelas snapped his book shut and put it aside. “Ridiculous.” He stood and rolled his shoulders, paced forward and out of Lavellan’s immediate sight. Lavellan tried to follow him with his gaze.

“Find the Inquisitor, I am assuming?” Asunara asked and Lavellan’s gaze flicked towards her. “I’ve seen memories from the past Satinalia.”

Lavellan grinned. “That’s right.”

He tried to look at Abelas again, but Asunara drifted forward and drew his gaze back to her blue glow.

“Solas caught you then,” she said.

The hood was blocking his periphery.

“Caught me unaware,” said Lavellan. “I won’t be as lenient this time.”

He stepped aside just as Abelas lunged for him. Abelas’ hand closed around empty air.

Lavellan backed away, eyed the two of them.

“[Felasel^{\[1\]}](#), Abelas,” Lavellan teased. “You’d go against me?”

“I apologise.” He didn’t look all that apologetic. “I was issued a challenge with a worthwhile

reward.”

“...By whom and what’s the reward?”

“Ellana. The reward is a tray of Dalish honeyed bread.”

Oh, of fucking course. Abelas had loved those sweet rolls in Elvhenan, and Dalish honeyed bread came the closest in texture and taste to them.

“You’d betray me for food?” asked Lavellan indignantly. He looked at Asunara. “And you? Have you been tempted by something like clam chowder too?”

She clasped her hands in front of her, her blue glow pulsing serenely. “No, I was just here to distract you. Alas, the cover is blown.”

Abelas lunged again, managed to grab his cloak. Lavellan slipped out of it and ran.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he muttered as Abelas’ *ridiculously long* legs steadily closed the distance between them despite the doors Lavellan was slamming in his face. Betrayed by his own associate!

“Thousands of years down the drain!” he yelled back at Abelas.

Lavellan’s best bet was escaping into a crowded place again. Thankfully, the Hall was full enough. He managed to slip away and down into the lower levels, going into Ellana’s small library and shutting the door behind him, panting. Good gods, he pitied whoever had had to run away from Abelas in the past when he’d still been one of the El’amelan’s guards.

He went to the desk, opened the lower drawer, and took out the spare cloak he’d placed there earlier in the day. Fools! Trying to outmanoeuvre a spymaster with over four thousand years of experience? Better luck next time.

Armed with the new cloak, Lavellan returned to the festivities and had another few close calls and some not so very close calls.

What even was their reward for unmasking him? Money, maybe.

After another close encounter, he found himself running from a group of *eight* people this time. For the love of the gods, why was the Inquisition so intense?

He found himself back in the Hall, weaving his way through the crowd. It was unfortunately much harder to lose *eight fucking people*. He went through the door to the Keep and ran through the corridors, frantically searching for any nooks he could hide in—

“I think he went this way!” cried a faint voice from behind him.

Where—

An outline of a door glowed on the nearby wall and that portion of the wall swung open, revealing a hidden passageway and a cloaked figure standing within. They smiled at him, the upper half of their face covered by a wolf mask carved out of white wood.

“In trouble, are we?” asked that familiar voice of falling silk.

Lavellan narrowed his eyes. “You.”

“You go left, I’ll go right!” said the distant voices. Their running footsteps grew closer. Lavellan threw a look behind him, then at Solas. He offered Lavellan his hand.

“You seem to be in need of a hiding place,” said Solas.

“This is way too convenient.”

“All the better to offer you my assistance.”

“Fen’Harel comes in friendly forms,” Lavellan shot back. “And then he devours you.”

His smile widened. “Only if you ask.”

A laugh accidentally escaped Lavellan.

“There! I heard something!”

Oh shit.

“What will it be, vun’lin?” asked Solas. Into the wolf’s jaws, hoping that he wouldn’t bite? Or try his luck elsewhere?

“Fuck it,” Lavellan muttered and rushed into the hidden passage. Solas chuckled and stepped aside to let him in, then closed the door. It swung shut without a sound. Darkness and silence draped over them, Lavellan’s breaths hot inside the mask. It was cramped inside. He still didn’t completely trust Solas, so he lit the space with the Anchor in case Solas tried anything.

“Not fond of the dark?” Solas teased, eyes glinting with emerald light.

“How did you find me?” asked Lavellan.

“I tailed you.”

“How long have you been tailing me?”

“Ever since you left the tavern. I had a... *benefactor*, you could say.”

The Iron fucking Bull. Lavellan was going to turn that bull into a *steer*! “Bull’s not getting his Golden Scythe.”

“I already offered him four casks.”

“Son of a bitch.”

Solas tilted his head. “Is it so wrong of me to want to support my beloved?”

Support, my ass, Lavellan thought. He was up to something. Lavellan wasn’t letting his guard down!

Muffled voices came from outside.

“Where’d he go?”

“I don’t know. Rei, check the stairs!”

“Got it!”

Footsteps ran past the door, then faded. He waited for a few more seconds to confirm that they were truly gone, then reached for the door handle—

Solas' hand shot out.

Lavellan caught his wrist in time, his hand just inches from Lavellan's mask.

"I don't think so," said Lavellan.

Solas grabbed with his other hand and Lavellan attempted to catch it, but he changed course at the last minute and captured Lavellan's wrist instead. He pushed Lavellan against the wall, wrist pinned over his head, other hand still struggling to reach the mask.

"We're evenly matched, fen'lin," Lavellan said, grinning.

He hummed. "Perhaps."

He let go of Lavellan's wrist, used that hand to quickly reach for his mask—

"No, you don't!"

But Lavellan was too late. Solas grabbed his mask and lifted it.

"And so," Solas said, smiling, "I have found the Inquisitor once again."

Lavellan almost smiled, but he covered it up with a scowl. "You can't win twice in a row!"

"That is poor sportsmanship."

"Sod off. What do you even get out of this?"

"Leliana and Josephine were offering a monetary reward. One hundred gold."

"Are you serious?"

"But I will have to ask for another reward." The Anchor's rippling light cast their dancing shadows over the walls. "I have no desire for money."

"What, then?"

Solas hummed and twisted the wrist still in Lavellan's grip so he could hold Lavellan's hand. He brought it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the knuckles. Lavellan raised a brow.

"You," said Solas. "All to myself." He turned Lavellan's hand over and kissed the inside of his wrist, gaze staying on him. "For the rest of the night."

Lavellan stared at him, pulse quickening, a slow smile pulling at his lips. "Taking the Inquisitor away from everyone?"

"I am not taking you. You willingly walked into my arms."

"Maybe you've beguiled me," he murmured, lifting Solas' mask and pulling him closer.

He leaned in, his gaze dropping to Lavellan's lips. "Perhaps."

The Anchor's light dimmed. "What a terrible wolf you are."

"Flee then," he said, hand cupping his cheek, "if I am so terrible."

"I think I've been caught rather good."

“Then you are all mine.”

The Anchor’s light vanished. Solas closed the distance, their lips meeting in the darkness.

Making out in a dark, dusty corridor wasn’t exactly prime romantic activity, as they discovered after Solas was accosted by a sneezing fit and Lavellan by a laughing one, then a coughing fit as the dust got in his throat. They made their way back to their quarters, Lavellan still laughing and coughing as he leaned on Solas.

“I need water,” he wheezed.

Thankfully, there was a pitcher of water in the room and Lavellan was able to soothe his throat. Solas stared at him as he drank.

“What?” Lavellan asked. “Something wrong with my drinking?”

“No, simply... There are cups. You need not drink it straight from the pitcher.”

“A pitcher is just a very big mug.”

“My mistake. Carry on.”

Lavellan grinned and kept drinking. Once he had his fill, he set it down and walked towards the bathroom for a quick bath since he was sweaty from running around the entire night. He dried and changed after, wringing his hair out with a towel as he returned. Solas was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at a leather-bound book in his hand. Lavellan sat beside him.

“What have you got there?” Lavellan asked.

He passed it to him. “A Satinalia present. I’d been working on it for a while.”

Lavellan placed the towel aside and graciously accepted it, opened the book. Solas lit a ball of mage light above them for more light. On the first page, Solas had written in Elvish: *Elvhenes Era*

“The People’s Dreams,” said Solas. “Or The People’s Tales. However you choose to interpret it. Both are true enough.”

Lavellan flipped to the second page and found a table of contents written in Solas’ neat and elegant script. His eyes widened in recognition of the listed stories. *The Apprentice and the Bucket*, *The Student of Syl’isenir*, *The Breathless Forest*, and so on.

“These are all tales from Elvhenan,” Lavellan murmured.

“I have been compiling the stories I thought you would have liked or did like once I’d told you of them. This was before you’d told me about your reincarnation, however, so it may seem a little silly now to give you a book of stories you already know.”

“That’s not silly at all! That’s rather sweet, thank you. You wrote this all from memory?”

“Mostly. I have had to visit the Fade for some, but otherwise... yes.”

“And by *hand*?”

Lavellan flipped through the tales, awe growing when he encountered an illustration. It was a more detailed and realistic style, but still, he would always recognise Solas’ hand. Lavellan made a delighted sound.

“And you drew the stories!”

Solas smiled. “I did.”

Lavellan grinned as he trawled through more of the illustrations, brushed admiring fingers over them, often brought the book close to his face and squinted so he could discern even more of the finer details. While he was perusing through it, Solas ran his fingers through Lavellan’s hair and gently dried it.

“The Slow Arrow,” Lavellan read, running his fingers over the illustration of the beast being felled by a single, falling arrow. Solas finished with his hair. “I was so pissed at you for this one. I was ranting to Dirthamen for *days*.”

“I was at my lowest point then, blinded by rage and hopelessness. It was cruel, what I had done. One of the Forgotten had applauded me for it.”

“Is that usually your indicator that something’s gone awry?”

He smiled wryly. “Yes.”

Lavellan kept flipping through, but paused when he reached the end of the final story. There were still more pages after it. Was there another story? It hadn’t been listed in the contents.

He turned the page.

The Clever Star.

Lavellan shot Solas an amused look. Solas cleared his throat and suddenly seemed fascinated by the far wall.

“Let’s see...” said Lavellan. “There once was a hunter—”

“*Must* you read it aloud?”

“—who wielded a bow of glinting sunlight and a sword of silver starlight. A hunter of great renown. He beloved the forest as it beloved him.”

“Mahanon,” he groaned.

Lavellan kept narrating. He had to flip the page when he reached the meeting with the Dread Wolf and was greeted by an illustration of a wolf shrouded in the darkness of the forest, facing off against a hunter bathed in the light of a forest clearing. The hunter’s hair was long and white.

“Subtle, Solas,” said Lavellan.

“We are past pretending that the hunter was not meant to be you.”

Lavellan hummed, still smiling wide, flipped through the story in search of more illustrations. There were two more. One depicted a rain of golden arrows falling upon the running wolf. The last was the hunter stretching a hand towards an injured halla, whose shadow was that of a six-eyed

wolf.

“Fen’Harel leapt and fell upon the hunter,” Lavellan narrated. The final line. He raised a brow at Solas. “Hey, the story’s incomplete. Where’s the part where they tried to tear each other’s clothes off while aggressively eating face?”

“*Fenedhis!*” he cursed, the tips of his ears reddening.

“No, I don’t think you gave me that then. Just a lot of tongue—”

Solas whacked Lavellan’s face with his towel from earlier and stood. Lavellan cackled.

“I am returning to my old room,” said Solas, extinguishing the mage light. “Goodnight—”

“No!” He placed the book on the nightstand and wrapped his arms around Solas’ middle, stopped him from walking off. “No, what the hell, you’re the one who wanted to steal me away from everyone!”

“I changed my mind.”

“Lies.”

Lavellan managed to wrangle him back into bed and draped himself over him, peppered Solas’ cheeks with kisses, his hair already long enough to fall on Solas’ face.

“You are heavy,” Solas muttered, closed an eye as Lavellan kissed just beneath it. “And your *hair!*”

“You can handle it.” A kiss on his brow. “Couldn’t you?” A kiss on the tip of his nose.

Solas sighed and resigned himself to his kiss-ridden fate. When Lavellan went to kiss the corner of his mouth, he turned his head and captured Lavellan’s lips instead. Lavellan hummed. Solas’ hands rested on his back, then wandered, their kiss leisurely and indulgent. One of Solas’ hands ventured lower.

And lower.

“Mind that hand,” Lavellan murmured, their lips brushing.

“You should have minded your tongue first,” Solas murmured back and kissed him again, deeper than the first. His hand rested on Lavellan’s ass and squeezed. Lavellan squirmed, made a low noise. Bastard. Solas smiled into the kiss and Lavellan nipped at his lip.

He grabbed a fistful of Lavellan’s hair in retaliation and pulled.

Lavellan broke the kiss with a gasp, almost collapsed on him. Solas sat up, coaxed Lavellan to move with him until he was straddling Solas’ lap, and bruised Lavellan’s neck with kisses. The knuckles of his fisted hand pressed into the back of Lavellan’s head, grip firm, and he pulled Lavellan’s head back further so he’d have access to more skin. Lavellan went slack, arms wrapping around Solas’ neck, breaths shuddering.

Then, he returned to kissing Lavellan stupid, laid waste to his senses.

“Solas,” he whispered in between kisses. “I have to—*mmph*— Breakfast with dignitaries. Tomorrow.”

He drew Lavellan's lower lip into his mouth and bit, grinned, the lip still caught between his teeth. Lavellan's heart raced, ears warming.

Solas released his lip. "Then it is a good thing that you prefer to wear a scarf."

Lavellan's lip throbbed. Solas' eyes were dark in the room, occasionally catching the flashes of firelight from the hearth.

"Smug bastard," said Lavellan, cupping his face and leaning in. "You're being mean to me on Satinalia. Isn't this supposed to be a day of giving?"

"I'm merely collecting my reward." His nails scraped pleasantly along Lavellan's scalp, sent tingling pinpricks racing down his spine. "And have I not been giving already?"

"Hm, true enough... I suppose it's my turn for giving now." He traced a finger along Solas' jaw and smiled. "I have an idea that'll benefit both of us."

"Do share."

Lavellan swiped his thumb over Solas' bottom lip and leaned in as though to kiss him, but he swerved at the last moment so he could murmur in his ear, "I could ride you."

The hand fisted in Lavellan's hair tightened. He kissed down the side of Solas' neck.

"Me on top of you," he murmured against the column of Solas' throat. "I could go for a *long* time. Maybe you can take me by surprise, push me onto my back, fuck me stupid into the bed, make me cry." He skimmed his lips over the line of his collarbones. "Does that sound appealing, fen'lin?"

"Perhaps," he said, voice low. He pulled Lavellan back by the hair so he could look him in the eye. "We should test it. I'll make my decision then."

Lavellan smiled.

He laid curled up and content beside Solas, a pleasant exhaustion lining every bone, a calm haze veiling his head. Solas held him close, fingers carding through his hair. The fire in the hearth had already dimmed to small, intermittent flickers.

"We need to do this more often," Lavellan said, voice hoarse.

Solas chuckled softly. "Which? The sex or the lathsal'in [\[2\]](#)?"

"Both."

"I am not opposed."

He smiled and nestled into Solas further, wrapping an arm around him and tucking his head beneath Solas' chin, their chests rising and falling in synchrony. Solas kept playing with his hair. Lavellan's eyes dipped.

"You're warm," Lavellan mumbled.

He rubbed small circles over Lavellan's nape. "As are you." He combed his fingers through Lavellan's hair, all the way to the end. The strands fell. "Your hair has gotten longer. Do you suppose it is long enough to braid again?"

"Hm, I'll have to check." Lavellan closed his eyes. "Do you remember the promise we made in the Dales? About each other's hair?"

"I could never forget it willingly."

"I... have a question about your hair. I've been wondering for a while. Why you'd shaved it. You... were quite proud of it, I remember."

Solas paused, then kept playing with his hair. "Do you recall? Those within the sanctuary began to grow out their hair."

"I recall."

Long hair had been a symbol of power and status in Elvhenan. Slaves must keep their hair short or shaved. If a slave had long hair, it indicated that they were their master's favourite, and such a thing often invited envy and derision.

"It was their rebellion," said Solas.

"A reclamation of their autonomy." He recalled spending a few afternoons helping people with styling their hair because such a thing would have been a first for many of them. Some had been so overjoyed with the length that they'd danced and watched with delight as their hair trailed behind them. It was a simple thing, but it had meant the world. Lavellan had grown his out at one point but hadn't fancied it since it kept getting in the way, so he'd cut it to a reasonable shoulder-length again.

"Precisely," said Solas. "It was a symbol of their fight." His voice softened. "And I was undeserving of such a symbol. Perhaps shaving it was also a paltry attempt at penance."

Lavellan opened his eyes, searched for a response but found none. He embraced Solas tighter instead.

"I have many penances to make," Solas murmured.

"I'll be there if you need me."

There was a smile in his voice. "Thank you, ma vhenan."

Lavellan's eyes closed again, and this time, the calming rake of Solas fingers and the sound of his steady breaths coaxed him into sleeping.

At daylight, Lavellan awoke, Solas' arm around him. He rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

He raised his left hand and stared at it, glanced to the orb on the couch.

He lowered his hand and closed his eyes for his morning commune with the Well, then opened

them to a brighter room. Solas was already awake, reading. Lavellan gazed up at him. Solas noticed his staring and smiled, closing his book.

“Morning,” Lavellan whispered.

“Good morning.” He tucked Lavellan’s hair behind his ear. “Sleep well?”

Lavellan hummed, then sat up and stretched, his hair falling over his shoulders. He twisted a strand between his fingers, considering its length, then glanced at his left hand again.

“Solas,” he asked, “would you like to learn how to braid my hair?”

“Of course I would.”

He smiled at Solas over his shoulder. “Okay. Come here.”

And once more, Lavellan talked him through the process, braided his own hair first — and felt a giddy flutter in his heart because it *was* long enough now — then undid it so Solas could try. Solas accomplished it on the first attempt. The two tiers were even and all. Whether because he was just that irritatingly good or because his body had preserved the muscle memory of it somehow from the past timeline, Lavellan didn’t know.

“Impressive,” said Lavellan, shifting to face him and running his fingers down the braid.

Solas smiled, the fractals of light from the stained-glass doors spilling down his neck. “You look lovely.”

Lavellan smiled back. “Thank you. Now that you know how to do it, you’ll have to help me in the mornings since I won’t be able to do it as well anymore.”

His smile morphed into a small frown.

“I do not follow,” said Solas.

Lavellan raised his left hand and gave the Anchor a short flare. Solas frowned deeper.

“This has to go,” said Lavellan, still smiling. “You know that.”

He looked away, a bitter twist to his lips.

“It will be painful,” said Solas.

“I know.”

“I can find a way to stabilise it permanently. Perhaps render it inert.”

Lavellan laughed softly. “Maybe not a good idea to start experimenting with it. It’s too volatile. It’ll be alright. Maybe I can still keep the arm this time since it’s not as bad. Even if I can’t, it’ll be fine, I’ve lived with it for three years. And I’m sure Dagna can think of a prosthetic like last time to make my life easier.”

Solas still wouldn’t look at him. Lavellan reached for his face and cupped it, swept a thumb over his cheek.

“It’ll be kinder in the long run,” said Lavellan.

He bowed his head, holding Lavellan's hand.

Then, defeated, he nodded.

Lavellan took a deep breath in, then let it out shakily. "We can do it tonight."

"Very well." Solas closed his eyes and held Lavellan's hand tighter. "Tonight."

Chapter End Notes

Satinalia one year ago and Solas is all "oh no I couldn't possibly spend time with you I don't deserve you" and one year later he's all "nom nom nom"

Lavellan: you do realise you wrote fanfiction *and* drew fanart of us?

Solas:

Lavellan: hot

Fun fact: the reason why Solas got Lavellan's braid right on the first try is because he's actually been practicing already. He'd asked Ellana for help, knowing that Lavellan's planning to grow his hair out and that Solas used to help with his braid in the past timeline.

Translation

[1] **Felasel:** Too slow [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Lathsal'in:** The act of playing with someone's hair. [\[↑\]](#)

The march of time

Chapter Notes

Ahhh, the penultimate chapter! We're almost there :D Chapter 114 on the 14th!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

happiness hard-fought

The orb looked heavy in Solas' hand.

Lavellan clenched and unclenched his left hand, tried to keep his breaths even as he sat on the bed. The inner circle already knew of the plan, and a few had offered to be there for the extraction for support, but Lavellan hadn't wanted them to see him in that kind of pain. Only a small team of their mages' best healers were in the room, Vivienne and Fiona among them. Ready to tend to his arm after the extraction.

"Are you ready?" asked Solas.

He nodded. "Should I... How should I position myself?"

"Any position you're comfortable in. So long as a clear connection can be made between your hand and the Anchor."

He opted for sitting cross-legged in front of Solas, their knees touching, his back to the headboard. Solas took Lavellan's hand, rubbed his thumb soothingly over the back of it. Vivienne stepped forward and offered a cloth-wrapped leather for Lavellan to bite on. He bit.

"Be ready," Solas told the mages. "We will have to work swiftly after to minimise the damage to his tissue and nerves."

Lavellan's gaze flicked towards Vivienne. Her gaze softened slightly and she nodded, stepped back.

He breathed in, out, then met Solas' eyes resolutely.

The orb flared green and the Anchor flickered in response.

"Ready?" Solas asked.

Lavellan nodded.

Emerald light sparked and burst and an electric burning raced through his arm, flooding his body, digging deep into bone. Lavellan screamed through his gag, eyes squeezing shut, static bursting behind his eyelids.

He leaned on Solas, head to his chest, free hand clutching at his tunic.

Weather it, weather it—

It hurts.

He bit harder, screamed louder. He couldn't tell where he ended and began, knew nothing but the bright point in his hand.

[“Ame amahn^{\[1\]}”](#), Solas soothed. “Ame amahn, ma vhenan. Just a little further.”

Lavellan pressed his face further into Solas' chest, clutched at his tunic tighter.

Blessedly, the burning soon eased. His hand and the orb still flickered with light, but the electric pain was dimming. Lavellan panted, face wet with sweat and tears. Solas said something, but his ears were ringing and he couldn't make out the words.

The flickering eased into sparks. Then the sparks winked away.

His entire arm tingled, but there was no more pain. He didn't dare look at it.

He passed out.

Waking up was a trial of its own. His entire body ached. He should keep a tally at this point of how many times he'd woken up in pain.

He looked out of the balcony doors, the sky outside veiled with thin clouds. The sound of running water was coming from the bathroom, so maybe Solas was inside. He twitched his hands beneath the blanket. His left hand moved. Stiff, but it was a movement, nonetheless. He took a deep breath in.

Moment of truth.

Carefully, he peeled the blanket off him with his right hand and revealed his other. There was some kind of thick glove over it that was preventing any movement, and his arm had been wrapped up to his elbow. A dull ache pulsed from his hand. He sat up and managed to lift that arm up to his shoulders.

The water stopped running. Solas came into the room and sat beside Lavellan, stroked his head.

“How do you feel?” Solas asked softly.

Lavellan leaned into his hand. “Sore. My arm feels numb.”

“Ah, yes. We'd coated it with a numbing agent to ensure you would not wake up in pain.”

Ah, that'd explain it. “What's the damage?”

“The magic had scarred and discoloured your skin, but we saved the tissue from becoming necrotic and eliminated the need for an amputation.” He brushed some of Lavellan's hair back over his shoulder. “But we are unsure how much of your nerves have been damaged. We cannot be certain how much functionality you've retained until it is safe to remove the protective glove.”

“That's already more than I could ask for.”

“I have also spoken to Dagna.” He placed a hand on Lavellan’s knee. “We can arrange for aiding devices to be made, should they prove necessary.”

Lavellan smiled and placed his hand over Solas’. “Thank you.”

He looked out at the morning sky again.

He did it. The Anchor was gone, he was still here, Solas was still here.

A fire ignited in him. It wasn’t blazing. Simply a steady heat, a welcome burn after so long of being the ghost of a flicker within a crumbling coal. Lavellan stood and made his way to the balcony, the cold stones outside shocking his bare feet. He admired the stretch of the mountain ranges ahead, then looked up at the expanse of the sky.

He did it.

A wide grin broke out across his face. He took in a lungful of crisp, mountain air, and raised his middle finger to the sky.

“Fuck you!” he yelled at the heavens. “I’m still *alive*!”

He threw his head back and laughed triumphantly.

He’d done it. He’d stayed.

Something warm settled over his shoulders. He looked back. Solas adjusted the Dalish blanket so that it would cover him properly, then embraced him from behind, chin resting on his shoulder. Lavellan smiled and leaned back into him.

After three days, the protective glove came off and the numbing ointment was rubbed clean. Lavellan examined his forearm and hand. A majority of his hand had been discoloured black, the patch of discolouration stretching in tendrils up his arm, ending at the elbows. He rubbed his fingers over the blackened skin. Slightly leathery. Numb. He couldn’t feel his fingers gliding over it. No sensation.

A healer they’d called all the way from Rivain arrived a little later and had a look at his hand. She specialised in rehabilitation after injuries, Josephine had said.

“Could you try opening and closing your hand, Inquisitor?” asked the healer.

He scrunched his brows in concentration, his fingers slowly closing in jerky movements.

“How did that feel?”

“No pain, but it was a bit of a struggle. Hand feels weak.”

They continued with the tests to determine the level of pain and functionality, what could be helped and what couldn’t, and commenced the retraining. As the week progressed, he gradually regained strength in his hands, could open and close them freely once more, but his grip had weakened, and his fine motor skills varied. Some days, he would complete activities well enough. Not at the same level as his other hand, but well enough. Some days, it would be difficult, and his

joints would ache.

With the problems determined, Dagna set to work on making an exoskeleton brace that would help him with his grip and dexterity.

Outside of rehabilitation, he carried on, though he did take it a bit easier. It wasn't his writing hand at least, so there were no issues there. Magic lessons with Vivienne continued, so long as it didn't involve vigorous movements with the staff, he helped Ellana when she was stumped for Abelas' lessons, coordinated with the Grey Wardens to arrange Blackwall's Joining in the future, tended to the aftermath of Corypheus' destruction during War Councils, and so on. In the mornings, Solas would braid his hair and Lavellan would help hold strands in place for him.

When questioned by others where the Anchor had gone, all Lavellan would say was, "No mortal can hold a fragment of the divine for long."

It was true enough, anyway.

Two weeks after the Anchor's removal, Alexius passed away.

They arranged for a Tevinter funeral and held a small ceremony in the garden. Felanor and Rosalie held onto one another for the entire service.

Dorian retreated after, quiet.

Back in Lavellan's quarters, a pile of Alexius' notes on Elvhen spells sat waiting on the desk. Lavellan and Solas perused through them with a heavy heart.

The next morning, Lavellan arranged to hasten the process of getting the University of Orlais to accept elven students, so that one day, in the future, elves like Felanor could enrol with Rosalie once they were old enough. If they wished.

He sat with Dorian in his corner of the library and offered him a bottle of wine. They shared it.

And so, time passed. Leliana began preparing Harding and Charter to step up for when she had to leave for Val Royeaux and accept the mantle of Divine, Bull took Dorian with him and the Chargers to their recent job to give Dorian something to do, Lavellan continued training his magic and arm, occasionally checking in with Dagna to revise the design of the exoskeleton brace for his hand and try on prototypes.

During a calm morning, he walked through Skyhold, passed through the golden arcade of laburnums. Due to their poisonous quality, some of their apothecaries used materials from it to add

to their potions. He smiled up at them and reached up to graze his fingers along the hanging flowers. Still flowering despite the winter. Just like the dogwood. Maybe the soil in Skyhold was weird and magical? Who knew? Not him, and not even the Well. He resigned that it was going to be an unanswered mystery, as much as he hated those.

“Lavellan?” a soft, familiar voice asked from behind him. Oh? Asunara was here today?

He turned to greet her.

He stopped.

Asunara stood across him, smiling, the dark strands of her hair cut just above the shoulders, swaying in the wind, the fair skin of her nose and the tips of her ears reddened by the winter chill. She was wearing ancient elven robes. Maybe borrowed from the Sentinels.

“Oh my gods,” he whispered, hurriedly made his way over. She met him halfway, threw her arms around him, and he hugged her solid form, laughing disbelievingly. “Oh my gods.” He pulled away, appraising her with a wide grin. She’d been the same height as him in Elvhenan, though seeing as his body as Mahanon was a tad shorter, she had a centimetre or two over him. “Oh my gods, you look so cold! Hold on.”

She laughed as he pulled his scarf off and wrapped it around her. “I have forgotten about the cold.”

“Your nose is so red! Keep your ears warm!” He took her by the wrist and dragged her back inside Skyhold. “Come on, let’s get you a helm or something.”

“You do not cover your head or ears,” she pointed out.

“I’m not the newly reborn spirit here.”

He fussed over her for a while, dragged her to the seat beside the Hall’s fireplace, interrogating her about her hunger, thirst, sleep, magic, comfort with her clothes, comfort with her movement—

“As beloved as you are,” she said, “if you start asking me about my bowel movements, I swear, I *will* throw you over the battlements.”

“I’m just making sure!” He sighed and toned it down. “Alright, well, what do you wish to do now?”

“I was hoping to do something along the vein of research again. Or perhaps I could relay what information I currently hold.”

“Teaching?”

She scrunched her face. “Not quite? Academic... trading?”

He hummed and looked up at the chandeliers in thought.

Asunara put her hand to her chin and tilted her head. “I suppose I could also work with your ambassadorial team to help manage public information and the Inquisition’s image. Or work with your espial team and see to organising the information your spies bring in.”

“Very similar tasks to your role as the Master of the Archives.”

She smiled. “Well, I quite enjoyed it. Spirit of Memory and all.”

“Solas and I have unofficially joined our espial forces together, so we’re rather full in that department. The ambassadorial team however... Josephine *has* been stressed that we’re rather short-staffed.”

“The Inquisition’s ambassadorial branch is short-staffed?”

“Well, we *are* an upstart organisation, no matter how much world-saving we’ve done. We have no affiliations with any countries, so some ambassadors would consider us an unstable job.”

As for academic trading...

He spotted Morrigan walking through the Hall with Kieran, the two of them disappearing into the garden. He sat up straighter. Yes... there was still that issue, wasn’t there...

“I think,” said Lavellan, looking at Asunara, “I also have an idea for your academic trading.”

He led Asunara to the garden and approached Morrigan, who was reading on one of the benches. They stopped in front of her and she looked up.

“Good day, Morrigan,” said Lavellan, “I would like to introduce you to Asunara.”

Asunara bowed her head and Morrigan tipped her head in return.

“You are an ancient elf?” asked Morrigan.

“Yes.”

“You do not have the vallaslin... You are no Sentinel.”

“No, I chose to have it removed. I was one of the Inquisitor’s agents in Elvhenan.”

“I see.” Her gaze flicked towards Lavellan. “And what is the cause for this introduction?”

“A mutual benefit. You wanted ancient elven history, she wants to impart her knowledge, I want it exchanged with respect and understanding but don’t have the mental energy to do it myself.” He gestured at the two of them. “So here we are.”

Morrigan hummed. “’Tis a most intriguing offer.”

“An opportunity rather than an offer,” said Asunara.

The two stared at each other. Lavellan watched them, assessing.

Morrigan eventually tipped her head again. “An opportunity,” she conceded. Lavellan smiled to himself. Ah good, these two would be fine, then. “And ‘twould be foolish of me to decline. I look forward to working with you for the duration of my stay.”

“Ah, yes,” said Lavellan. “When will Cel— Empress Celene call you back?”

“’Tis difficult to ascertain. With Corypheus no longer a threat, it may be a week or a month or half a year until she calls me back to her side.”

“Fair enough. Alright, well, I still have to show Asunara around. Are you two alright to start tomorrow?”

They agreed, and after a farewell, Lavellan and Asunara walked back to the Hall.

“She is Lady Mythal’s daughter?” asked Asunara.

“Yes.”

She paused. “That would make her half-sibling to the Evanuris.”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“... Your almost-half-sister-in-law?”

“Every word of that was a larger blow than the last.”

He also introduced Asunara to Josephine, and she was enthusiastically accepted into the ambassadorial team, and the day after, Asunara and Morrigan began their collaboration.

Not even a week later, Abelas came with the rest of the Sentinels and asked for an informal audience with Lavellan, informing him that they’d accepted his offer to learn from the Dalish. Lavellan stared at them, wide-eyed. Abelas smiled. Lavellan immediately launched into searching for a Dalish tutor for each Sentinel, with help from Abelas, Ellana, and Solas. He called on the Dalish already within Skyhold and queried who would be interested, trying to match up their personalities and knowledge. He also sent word to the Dalish clans to gauge their interests.

The months grew busier. Lavellan planned lessons, checked in on their progress, all while helping people recover from Corypheus’ inanity.

Soon, the year passed and they entered 9:43, the First Day celebration joyous and merry. At the turn of that year, people planned what to do next now that Corypheus was no longer a threat. Many of the Inquisition’s members returned to their families, their duties over — though they still had a significant standing army left — but new people also came in, wishing to help with reparations. Cullen was still kept busy with the new turnovers, but at least he wasn’t under as much stress.

Cassandra continued her campaign to search for the missing Seekers now that she had the time, while Sera voiced that she might return to continue her Red Jenny work. Plenty of nobles looking to punch down now that the big bad was gone, she’d said.

Varric made plans to return to Kirkwall, grumbling about its current state, and Lavellan teased, “Careful, they might give you responsibility if you keep funnelling all those complaints at them,” and Varric laughed it off.

He wouldn’t be laughing when he realises Lavellan hadn’t been joking.

And Leliana had to leave for the Grand Cathedral for her inauguration as Divine soon. They made sure major political situations would be taken care of before she leaves, with Lavellan collaborating with Briala to push for servants to receive better wages.

Speaking of Briala, Lavellan sent word that Fen’Harel would fully open the eluvian network once

more, with the agreement that both their agents could utilise it.

When spring came with the Wintersend celebrations, they also doubled it as Leliana's farewell party, with the promise that they'd come for her inauguration in a month.

They saw her off at the gates a week after. Lavellan embraced her.

"Thank you for everything," said Lavellan.

She held him tighter. "And thank *you* for everything."

He watched her carriage leave, passing beneath the golden laburnums.

Dagna excitedly called him to the undercroft and showed him the finished exoskeleton for his hand. It really did look a little like a skeletal hand with its thin strips of metal (obsidian...?) attached to small straps, the strips threaded with thin veins of lyrium, cushioned by the leather and cloth that was supposed to rest on the back of his hand. He tried it on, slipped his finger through the straps, the metal strips resting over each finger, and wrapped the larger strap around his wrist to secure it in place. Lightweight.

"There," she said. "This should help with strength and dexterity!" She lowered her voice. "It definitely helped when you admitted you were a mage, because then you'll be able to manipulate the components yourself." She tapped the metal strips. "You just need to feed the lyrium some magical energy and then it'll connect to the metal. Will it to move with your magic, and the entire thing follows! I did my best to make sure the brace is lightweight, so it won't get in the way if you ever need to fight! Oh, and you can still wear gloves over it if you'd like, though maybe avoid woolly ones so they don't catch on the metal. The metal strips have also been flattened so they don't dig into your fingers."

Lavellan smiled. "Thank you," he said softly. "Where would I be without you?"

"Aw, shucks." She smiled back. "Just happy to do my job. I'm glad my creations are of help. Now, come on! Let's try it!"

They called the specialised Rivaini healer and performed a series of exercises in a private room. Lavellan concentrated with using his magic to move the fingers at first, and when he proved successful, they moved onto testing its function.

He grinned when he closed his hand around a weighted rod and held it in place, picked items up and placed them down in specific areas, and copied the hand movements the healer would show him. It was all easier with the brace. And the mana burden was low, so he needn't worry about accidentally draining himself.

Once the exercises were over for the day, he spent the entire afternoon showing off his brace to his friends, though he did go overboard with shuffling cards and ended up showering them all over himself.

That night, he undid his braid himself and Solas smiled at his excitement.

Life went on. Bull and Dorian were gone more often for jobs with the Chargers, Blackwall went to complete his Joining with the Grey Wardens, Sera and Vivienne returned to Orlais, Varric was set to return to Kirkwall in a month or so, a few of the Sentinels had gone with their Dalish partners to their clans for some first-hand experience. Skyhold was beginning to feel... well, not empty, but... different.

It was time for him to leave for a while too.

He smiled down at his Dalish scarf.

There was another home waiting for him.

He retired to his quarters for the day and stared at the stacks of writing on his desk. The information from the Well of Sorrows. He'd been writing as much as he could the past few months, had organised them into topics so that he could bind them into books. Maybe he could get started tomorrow.

Footsteps ascended the stairs, approached from behind.

"I'm thinking it's about time I turned these into books," said Lavellan. "Getting rather crowded on my desk. What do you think?"

He turned to face Solas and stopped.

Solas smiled down at him.

Lavellan looked up, mouth falling open, affronted.

"No!" cried Lavellan. Solas sighed. "How dare you!"

"It is not that drastic of a height difference."

"Not that drastic? I'm eye-level to your *chin*. And you're not just taller, you'd gotten a bit broader. Go back!"

His amused smile returned. "This *is* me going back. This is my original size."

"Did nobody question you why you'd suddenly grown?"

"I told those who'd asked that it was a magical mishap."

Lavellan covered his face. "You just couldn't let me be taller than you."

"You were never taller than me."

"We were the same height."

"Your hair had given you an additional centimetre."

"Excuse me?" He uncovered his face. "My hair was *not*—"

Oh, Solas had gotten... very close. Lavellan stared up at him, his words fading.

"Not?" encouraged Solas, smile growing.

Lavellan pursed his lips.

“You are,” he said, “irritating.”

He grabbed Solas by the collar and pulled him down into a kiss. Solas was still smiling. He rested his hand on the small of Lavellan’s back and pulled him closer, deepened the kiss, backed him into the desk.

“If you mess up my stacks,” Lavellan muttered, “I will never forgive you.”

Solas shot the desk a look. “Are you hoping to build a fortress?”

“I’m going to turn them into stilts. Can’t stand you being taller.”

“Your words are not matching your actions.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your leg hooked around my waist.”

“Ah, I see.” Lavellan lowered his leg.

Then, he grabbed Solas by the collar again and dragged him to bed.

They sat in a warm bath together after because Lavellan would like to walk the next morning, thank you very much. He leaned back against Solas with a soft sigh.

Solas chuckled, kissed along his shoulder. “Did you enjoy it?”

“You are a terror.”

“You provoked me.”

He tilted his head as Solas’ kisses reached his neck. “And I’d do it again.”

Solas bit lightly. Lavellan laughed. He relaxed further and laid his head back on Solas’ shoulders, dwelt within the quiet for a moment, enjoying the warmth from both Solas and the bath.

It was still surreal, sometimes, looking at how things were now. He still feared that one day, he would wake up in that past future and find that it had all been a dream. Sometimes, he *would* dream of such things. He would dream of waking in that ashen future, still in that battlefield, Solas and Cassandra lying dead nearby while he drowned from the blood in his lungs, unable to die, forever in pain.

“What are you thinking?” Solas asked softly.

“Just...” He closed his eyes. “I’m afraid that this is all a dream. This happiness. I’m afraid that I’ll wake up in that tragic future. I want to hold onto this happiness, but I know it won’t last, and I wish I didn’t think that way, but I can’t help it.”

“Just because it is not eternal does not mean it will never return when it fades.” He linked their

hands together beneath the water. “I fear the same thing. But I have sworn to not let my fear tarnish what bright things I possess now. It will be alright, Hanon.” He rested his head on Lavellan’s shoulder. “*We* will be alright.”

Lavellan paused. Then, he smiled. “Right.” He opened his eyes and looked at him. “You called me Hanon.”

“Should I stop?”

“Absolutely not. Family gets to call me Hanon.”

Solas raised his head and he met Lavellan’s gaze, his eyes shining with earnestness. “I am honoured.”

Lavellan’s smile softened.

Solas was right. Lavellan had fought hard for this happiness, and he would not let the uncertainties of the future ruin what he’d attained now.

“My heart,” Lavellan murmured, “I think... it’s time I brought you home. Family should meet family, don’t you think?”

Solas smiled and held him tighter. Lavellan grinned.

After a while, Lavellan said, “You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“Petrified.”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to Solas for his sincerity about being terrified

Literally just learned about nerves a few weeks ago for my physiology class so it's been interesting trying to figure out the effects of magical-shenanigan-caused injuries + healing magic on them.

Rip Alexius tho :(

Next chapter is the last! Lavellan gets to go home and Solas finally meets the in-laws.

Translation

[1] **Ame amahn:** I'm here [\[1\]](#)

Follow my voice

Chapter Notes

Here we are :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I will call you home

Lavellan sent word to the Keeper about their plan to return to the clan, wrote that he was taking Fen'Harel with him, and to please tell the rest of the clan to get their panicking and fuming in now before meeting him so that nobody would shoot on sight. Well, they wouldn't. Most of them were reasonable and would wait for an explanation. But one could never be too careful.

He began packing, the books filled with knowledge from the Well easily filling a large bag. Meanwhile, Solas stared at the closet, his brows furrowed.

He'd been staring for a while.

"Is everything alright?" asked Lavellan. "You haven't moved in five minutes."

"I..." His brows furrowed further. "Do not know what to wear."

Lavellan opened his mouth, closed it, and bit back a laugh. He had such a serious face too.

"Wear whatever you're comfortable with," Lavellan said after recovering.

"I am comfortable in many attires but are they *appropriate* for the situation?"

"What's wrong with your usual tunic and coat?"

"To meet Clan Lavellan? When they know your lover is the Dread Wolf? They may doubt my sincerity if I appear in such humble clothes." He put his hand to his chin in thought. "I am not appearing in armour either. That would present the wrong message. It cannot be anything too ostentatious either."

Lavellan sighed fondly and made his way over, walked into the closet and picked out a handful of clothes and coats, and pressed them into Solas' arms.

"No matter how you choose to appear," said Lavellan, "you are still my Solas. You need only greet the clan with respect and open-mindedness, and they will return it."

Solas looked down at his clothes.

Lavellan smiled. "But if you need help..." He picked out Solas' usual light tunic, a darker coat, and the wolf pelt from the pile of clothes. "There. A mixture of comfort with the tunic, some formality but not too much with the coat, and the wolf pelt for some character. What do you think?"

"That..." He relaxed. "Will do. I apologise. This seems— trivial."

“Not at all. It *is* nerve-wracking. Not just that, but... You’re introducing yourself wholly. Not as the wayward apostate or the trickster god, but just... you. That is more frightening than any persona.” He cupped Solas’ cheek. “Thank you for doing this, truly.”

Solas grasped that hand by the wrist and planted a kiss on Lavellan’s palm.

Abelas would come with them to Clan Lavellan since Ellana was his Dalish partner, and so that he could commence the next phase of his lessons with the Dalish. But first, they made a stop at the Emerald Graves with Asunara and visited the Din’an Hanin. There were no more undead within.

They searched the crypts and checked the plaques, hoping Vedir’s grave hadn’t been destroyed.

“Found it!” Asunara cried.

Lavellan let out a relieved breath and made his way over to her. She gestured at the plaque and sealed crypt with a sad smile. They crowded around it. Vergala perched on Lavellan’s shoulder. Indeed, Bel’vedir’s name had been carved into the stone plaque.

“Hello, old friend,” Lavellan greeted softly and placed his hand upon the stone. “Look who I brought with me.”

Asunara and Abelas smiled.

“I’ve got a sister now, too! And I found Solas and Vergala again! Imagine that.” Lavellan brushed his fingers over their name. “You did it, Vedir. You showed me a path home. I’m sorry for all of the hardships you have had to endure just to give me this happiness. Thank you for keeping my memory alive. Thank you for watching over the People and defending them.” He bowed his head, vision blurring. “Farewell, my friend. Rest well. I miss you so terribly.”

He stepped back and wiped his tears before they could fall. Abelas and Asunara stepped forward and each said their piece. Once they finished, they stood together and spent a few moments in silence. Sunlight and birdsong slipped in through one of the broken arched windows above, draping them with warmth and song.

Afterwards, they travelled to Val Royeaux for Leliana’s inauguration as Divine Victoria and gathered the inner circle once more, barring Blackwall due to Grey Warden business. And also, Orlais. Not a good idea for him to show up since his almost-execution hadn’t been that long ago. Lavellan also met Briala again, though they weren’t able to talk to each other for long.

He wore gloves to hide his hand and the braces since he didn’t feel up to explaining over and over to everybody present about what had happened, and he wasn’t keen on receiving any token pity or coos of, “How unfortunate!” from the nobles since he was doing just fine, thanks. Rather happy, really.

And from there, they said farewell to Asunara and boarded a ship bound for Wycome.

The sea gave way to Wycome's coast and Vergala took off into the skies again once they alighted.

Keeper Deshanna was waiting on the docks. Solas clasped his hands tighter behind his back. Lavellan took his hand and laced their fingers together, made their way to Keeper Deshanna side by side. She appraised Solas.

"I greet you cordially, Keeper Istimaethoriel," said Solas, bowing. "My name is Solas, though you know me as Fen'Harel."

Keeper Deshanna glanced at Lavellan. He smiled and nodded. Her expression softened.

She returned the bow. "Andaran atish'an, hahren. I greet you cordially on behalf of Clan Lavellan, and we welcome you as family of our family." She bowed at Abelas next. "I greet you as well, hahren. I have heard of your circumstance from Ellana. May I know your name?"

Abelas also bowed. "I am called Abelas, Keeper. It is my honour to be placed in your clan's care."

"The honour is ours." She looked at Ellana and Lavellan, opened her arms. "And you two?"

Lavellan grinned. He and Ellana ran into her arms and embraced her, relaxing into her hold.

"Welcome home," whispered Keeper Deshanna.

They disentangled from the hug and she led them through Wycome's twisting streets, the coastal city boasting picturesque limestone buildings and terracotta roofs that gleamed beneath the sun. Seabirds called out, swooping at scraps of food, fleeing whenever an irritated hand would wave them away.

Wycome's inhabitants waved at or greeted Keeper Deshanna as she passed, and she hailed a wagon for them to ride to the city's gates.

"Clan Lavellan is situated in the forest just outside the walls," she explained during the ride. "The forest is our home after all. It is where we derive the most comfort."

"How are things with the new Wycome council?" asked Lavellan.

"Still focusing on recovery. The process has been expedited greatly with the Inquisition's help, so thank you for that, da'len."

They wagon dropped them off at the gates and they followed her into the forest, the city's bustle transitioning into the tranquil sounds of nature. Keeper Deshanna stopped halfway into their trek and faced the group.

"It would be best if I go first," she said. "The clan knows you are coming, but I would like to give them some time to prepare."

"Of course," said Solas. "Take as much time as you need."

"Here," said Lavellan, urging Vergala to perch on the Keeper's shoulders. "Just tell her to return to us when they're ready, and she'll lead us to where you are."

Keeper Deshanna smiled at Vergala, who tilted her head and cawed in greeting. The Keeper went on ahead and the four of them waited. Solas stood still, hands clasped behind his back once more, staring off into the distance, expression tight.

Ellana leaned towards Lavellan. "Hey, is he even breathing?" she whispered. Lavellan laughed

nervously.

Vergala returned after a few minutes and perched on Lavellan's waiting arm.

"They're ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Vergala echoed. She flew off again and led them to the clan. Lavellan took Solas' hand and shot him a reassuring smile, and together, they walked to meet Clan Lavellan, his heart aflutter. Lavellan hadn't seen them in so long. The last time he'd seen them, they'd all been asleep. Could he handle seeing them again?

Solas squeezed his hand. Lavellan relaxed.

When he spotted the purple and blue sails within the forest, a pressure and warmth built in his chest. The members of Clan Lavellan that had been scattered around the area paused what they were doing, looking towards them as they arrived. He couldn't help his giddy grin, but he stayed in place. Ellana had no such reservations. She dropped her bags and ran towards her friends, barrelling into them with a hug. Lavellan's childhood friends hollered at him and waved enthusiastically, and everyone grew abuzz with greetings and how-are-yous.

When the clan's elders stepped forward, however, the joyous atmosphere grew slightly solemn. The elders regarded Lavellan, then the two ancient elves with him.

Solas stepped forward and gave them the same, deep bow that he'd given Keeper Deshanna.

"Andaran atish'an, Fen'Harel," said Hahren Dahnarethi, one of their most senior members.

"[Mar enaste lan em lath'in'iseth](#)^[1]," Solas returned.

Hahren Dahnarethi shot Lavellan a look. Lavellan rubbed the back of his neck. "When this one kept asking for stories about you, I did not think it would lead him here."

Some of Lavellan's friends snickered. Already being mortified not even two minutes in after arrival. That was family for you.

The elders bowed at Abelas as well and greeted him by name. Ah, the Keeper must have told them.

The leaders of the clan then stepped forward for their own introductions. Hearthmistress Leilani crushed Lavellan in a hug and warmly shook Solas and Abelas' hands, clapping their backs (to the horror of their elders), but Solas and Abelas didn't mind. If anything, it probably eased their nerves. The Craftmaster, who'd already been among the group of elders, stepped forward and introduced himself. Next was the Halla Keeper, then—

Warleader Aenoreir.

Aenoreir held some resemblance to Ellana and Lavellan, with the same brown skin, white hair, and facial features, though his eyes were a dark brown and he had a squarer jaw and a slimmer, sharper nose. He bore Ghilan'nain's vallaslin.

"I greet you," said Aenoreir, bowing. "I am Warleader Aenoreir, Mahanon and Ellana's cousin on our father's side."

His gaze flicked towards Lavellan, appraising him with a faint sneer. Lavellan met his gaze coolly.

"Warleader," said Lavellan, curt.

“Inquisitor,” said Aenoreir.

“You look just as stupid as when I last saw you.”

“At least my face doesn’t look like it’s been trampled by the halla.”

Ellana sighed.

They stared-off for a few more seconds before Lavellan cracked, a snort escaping him. Aenoreir grinned. He hooked his arm around Lavellan’s neck and dug his knuckles into the top of his head.

“Ow, ow, let go, dipshit. You *smell!*”

“Didn’t even say goodbye, you no-good, lousy, pile of halla dung!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, don’t ruin my hair!”

While Abelas and Solas talked to the elders, Lavellan and Ellana returned to the rest of the clan and received everyone’s warm welcomes. Some of the children who’d been attached to him rushed forward and clung to his leg. Lavellan’s heart twisted at their faces.

They’d perished too, last time. They were still children...

He knelt so he could hug them, holding them tight.

“[Ha’ma’lin^{\[2\]}](#)?” asked one of the kids. “Why are you crying?”

Lavellan smiled shakily and wiped his tears. “I’m just happy to be back, da’len. I’ve missed you all.”

He spoke to a few more people, before the Halla Keeper called him over.

“Guess who misses you,” said the Halla Keeper.

He led Lavellan to the clearing where the halla were grazing. One of the halla raised her head, ears flicking as she looked at Lavellan.

Lavellan beamed. “Hal!”

She trotted towards him and pushed her head insistently into his chest, kept pushing and nudging, her horns dangerously close to nicking his face. He staggered back.

“I’m sorry!” he said. “Sorry, sorry, hey, watch the horns!”

She calmed after a while and he stroked her face with a smile, embraced her.

“Want to go for a ride?” he asked.

She brushed her hoof against the soil and turned. He slipped onto her back, fed the brace under his gloves with magic so he could hold onto her reins properly, and slowly trotted around with her for a while under the Halla Keeper’s guidance, familiarising himself with riding a halla again. Once

ready, he rode off into the forest, whooping with boyish glee. Vergala followed overhead.

Oh, he'd missed this.

He hadn't ridden a halla bareback in a while, so he wasn't gone for too long. He returned with Hal to the main area of congregation and gave her back to the Halla Keeper. Vergala perched on Hal's back. Hal let her.

"Oi, Hanon!" called Aenoreir from behind him. Lavellan looked over his shoulder. Aenoreir grinned and gestured at the hunters behind him. "Look who I brought."

Lavellan perked up at their familiar faces, excused himself to the Halla Keeper, and rushed to them, laughing in delight as they swarmed him and got scolded for leaving without saying goodbye. They walked around and caught each other up on what had been happening with each other's lives.

"Oh yeah, Iranae and I got married," said Aenoreir, slinging his arm around her. Miracle of miracles. Aenoreir had liked her since he was ten.

"I also found out a month ago that I'm pregnant," said Iranae, grinning.

"Holy shit, congratulations," said Lavellan. "Although, I vaguely remember telling you to run from him."

She exaggerated a tragic sigh. "He snared me with his good cooking."

"And my dashing good looks?" asked Aenoreir.

She paused. "Sure."

"Hey, what was with that pause?"

"So, Mahanon!" she chirped, skilfully evading. "Let's talk about *your* love life. Who'd have thought your childhood crush would also end up your lover."

The hunters laughed. Lavellan's ears burned. "What? He was *not*."

"You *really* liked the stories about Fen'Harel," said Aenoreir.

"Liking stories doesn't mean I had a crush on him. And anyway, he's barely anything like the stories." Crush? Ridiculous. He'd been disapproving most times when reading about Fen'Harel's actions, and sure, Lavellan had liked his cunning because apparently, he *did* have a type— No, wait. It wasn't a type. It was just—

He stared at the ground.

"True, he doesn't look anything like I imagined him," said one of the hunters.

"How did you two even meet?" asked Aenoreir.

Lavellan sighed. "He introduced himself as Solas, there to help after the Conclave blew up. Saying he had an idea on how to close the rifts. He worked with the Inquisition. But he's... a bad liar."

They stared at him.

"The trickster god is bad at lying?" asked Iranae.

“Well, he’s not *bad*. He was— annoyingly clever with his half-truths.”

“Half-truths are lying.”

“But they’re half-*truths*,” said Aenoreir.

They erupted into a discussion about whether half-truths counted as lies or not. Lavellan watched them with a small smile. Well, they would know Solas’ story soon enough. Solas would tell it himself when he was ready, though it was up to him how in-detail he’d like to be. Either way, his truth would still have huge implications.

As for Lavellan, he would reveal who he was to the clan elders, but not the rest of the clan. He didn’t want his friends to treat him any differently, but he wanted to ease the elders. The sudden loss of the clan’s guardian would have shaken them the most, so... Lavellan wanted them to know that he’d never left them.

He watched the rest of his clan milling about, watched the purple and blue sails fluttering in the wind.

His clan.

I’m home.

They had a few spare aravels for sleeping so Ellana claimed one for herself and another for Abelas, while Lavellan and Solas would share Mamae’s. Lavellan unfurled the canvas and opened the aravel with Ellana’s help and stepped inside, back into that small, intimate space steeped in fond memories. He smiled.

“Help me set up the bedrolls on the deck,” said Lavellan.

After they set up his aravel, he helped set up hers, but they left Abelas’.

“I’m going to teach him how to unfurl the canvas and open up the aravel,” she said.

“Good plan.”

Lavellan helped with preparing for the feast after. Solas and Abelas soon finished their discussion with the elders and Lavellan excused himself, greeted Solas again while Ellana fetched Abelas.

“How’d it go?” asked Lavellan.

“I was interrogated thoroughly about my intentions towards you,” said Solas.

“What did you say?”

“The truth.”

“Which is?”

“That I have hurt you and many in my folly, and that I am truly repentant.” He smiled at Lavellan.
“That you are my light in the darkness, and I am trying to find the correct path. That I am not the

perfect man, nor am I the most deserving, but I will not concede defeat, and I will work to prove my sincerity.”

Lavellan smiled back and cupped the back of Solas’ neck, pulled him down so they could rest their foreheads together.

“Ar lath, ma vhenan” whispered Lavellan. “I leave my heart in your care.”

“And mine in yours.”

He took Solas’ hands in his and led him to the bonfire they’d set up. “Come, come! They’ve set up a feast!”

Lavellan proudly introduced Solas to more people as they waited for the food, then they ate and the clan danced and sang and Lavellan watched with a smile. The aching homesickness that had been plaguing him for so long slowly eased with every peal of laughter and every cheer.

Solas stood and offered Lavellan his hand.

“Would you care for a dance?” asked Solas.

Lavellan grinned and took his hand. “I very much would.”

The next day, Lavellan called for a meeting with the elders of Clan Lavellan, the Keeper’s book held close to his chest. Keeper Deshanna was kind enough to lend them one of the meeting rooms in Wycome’s city hall, so that was where they all sat with Solas by his side, Ellana on his other, and Abelas beside her.

“Thank you all for coming,” said Lavellan. “There was something important I had to say, relating to Clan Lavellan’s origins.”

He placed the book on the table. Keeper Deshanna’s eyes widened in recognition.

“A secret has been passed down from Keeper to Keeper,” started Lavellan, “about the origins of our clan, and exactly who it was named for.”

“We’ve been told it was an ancient elf,” said the Craftmaster. “And that an Emerald Knight who’d been a close friend told their story. Beyond that, we know little else.”

Lavellan smiled. “It’s true.”

“If this is a secret, why do you reveal it to us, da’len?” asked Hahren Dahnarethi. “Should Keeper Istimaethoriel not have the say in this?”

“I was going to tell her, but I thought it would have been better to say it with all of you together.” He took a deep breath in. “But first, I must ask. Are you all familiar with the guardian of Clan Lavellan?”

Recognition rippled across their expressions and they murmured amongst each other, though Keeper Deshanna’s remained unsurprised.

“That guardian was a spirit of Change,” said Lavellan. “That guardian was the man once called Lavellan.”

This time, Keeper Deshanna matched everyone else’s shocked expressions.

Lavellan smiled gently. “That man, as I’ve recently found out, was me.”

He opened the book and went through it as he told the summary of his time as Lavellan. He was getting rather good at telling it. Practice, he supposed. By the end of it, Hahren Dahnarethi looked as though his soul was about to flee his body.

“Do you plan to tell the rest of the clan?” asked the Keeper.

Lavellan stared at the book and murmured, “No. Maybe someday. But not soon. I’d just… like to go home for now. I chose to tell you all because you still remember the guardian of Clan Lavellan, and I wanted to ease your worries about his— my disappearance.”

The elders shared heavy looks with each other.

He stood and bowed. “I thank you for listening, hahrens. Please don’t see me any differently because of this. I am still Mahanon, regardless of my past.”

“You do not need to bow to us,” said Hahren Dahnarethi. “Simply… might you give us a few days to come to terms with this?”

“Of course. I understand how heavy this is. Take all the time you need.”

He sat back down and fielded more leftover questions, and once that was finished, they made their way back to the forest.

The Craftmaster stopped him once they reached the others and pulled him aside momentarily.

“What is it, hahren?” asked Lavellan.

He chuckled. “Am I really the hahren here?”

“Well, I’m the one who looks youthful.”

That earned him a clobber over the head. “You brat!”

Lavellan laughed and rubbed the back of his head. The Craftmaster sighed.

“There is something I have been meaning to say ever since your return,” said the Craftmaster. “And now that you have told us your story, I feel that it is more important that I do this.”

“What is it?”

“You know what a [*Mi’ghi’len*](#)^[3] is, don’t you?”

Lavellan nodded. It was a sword created using a special crafting technique only privy to specific crafters. Nobody knew whether it had Dalish or Elvhen origins, though Lavellan suspected it was a variant of a crafting technique from Elvhenan. The Mi’ghi’len were renowned for their incredible durability and longevity, notable examples being Lindiranae and Mathalin’s sword, Evanura. Some have taken to calling them Immortal Blades due to this. These blades would usually be passed down from generation to generation.

“I possess the knowledge to craft one,” said the Craftmaster. “And it would be my honour to craft one for you.”

Lavellan’s eyes widened. “What? But— They’re only given to Warleaders with over ten years of service. I only had four years.”

“And to elves who have achieved the exceptional, or those who have helped our people greatly. Initially, I’d wished to give it to you for efforts as the Inquisitor, but after hearing of how extensively you have been looking out for us... It is long overdue at this point. It will take me a year, but the Arlathvhen is approaching in six months, and I will employ the help of other crafters present. It will expedite the process.”

“Hahren, I...” Warmth built behind his eyes. “I would be honoured. Thank you.”

The Craftmaster’s eyes brightened. “The honour is mine. Come, come, tell me what materials you would prefer for the components, as well as the length and shape you would prefer!”

Lavellan retreated to the aravel for the day, climbed to the deck, and lit the lantern hanging from the canvas ropes. Solas followed after him. They sat on the bedroll together. Lavellan removed the braces and placed them aside, massaging his hand as Solas undid his braid.

“The Craftmaster wants to make me a *Mi’ghi’len*,” said Lavellan.

“The Guiding Blade? I had not known your Craftmaster possessed such a knowledge.”

“Neither did I. I also worry about my swordplay. I’ve neglected it. The old Warleader would have chewed me out for it.” His expression softened. He ran his fingers over the discoloured patches of his hand. “He would have been among the elders if he’d still been alive.”

“How are you feeling after that talk?”

“Lighter.”

Solas finished with the braid. They lay down together, staring up at the aravel’s canvas.

“How much are you planning to tell the clan about yourself?” asked Lavellan.

“I do not know,” he murmured. “There are... many events to consider, as well as their impact.”

“The slavery and the vallaslin?”

“Yes.”

“It’s... difficult.” Lavellan sighed. “I couldn’t even bring myself to specify it when I was telling the elders.”

“But it cannot be neglected. It was a large part of our experiences.”

“That’s true.”

They said nothing for a while. Lavellan watched the flicker of the lantern flame. It would have

been a hazard since everything around them was so flammable, but those lantern cages were enchanted to keep the fire contained within them. Since he'd grown up with them, he'd been shocked to learn that lanterns in human towns could cause fires.

"Why don't they just enchant the lanterns?" he asked.

"They don't like magic," Mamae answered.

"Well, that's stupid. Magic can be useful when done properly."

She smiled. "Indeed, but they are too afraid of the fire to think of the ability to contain it."

He smiled sadly.

"Perhaps I could speak of the slavery but leave the truth of the vallaslin for another time," said Solas. "Considering that my appearance is already..."

"A bit of a shock," Lavellan agreed.

"That is an understatement." He turned on his side to face him and Lavellan did the same. They stared at each other.

"Maybe the truth of the vallaslin can be revealed at the Arlathvhen," said Lavellan.

Solas' brows raised. "That— is rather ambitious. But then again, has that ever stopped you?"

"No."

"No."

They held each other's hand. Lavellan kept staring at him, the lantern's tender glow softening his features. How surreal. Here Solas was, with him in Clan Lavellan. Who would have thought...

"Hanon?" Solas asked gently.

Lavellan's vision blurred, his heart full. "I'm just... so happy." He pulled Solas' hand closer to him and held it close to his chest. "There was a time where I thought that I would never feel happiness like this again."

Solas wrapped an arm around him and rested his hand on the back of Lavellan's head. "As did I," he murmured.

The tears fell slowly. Lavellan closed his eyes and smiled.

He never thought he'd ever know a peace like this again.

The two of them slept holding each other's hand, Lavellan's ear to Solas' chest, the steady beating of his heart lulling him to rest.

There were still many things to tend to, numerous unresolved problems to address, solutions to find, and new challenges to face. But for now, they rested quietly, dwelling in the peace that they'd been denied of for so long.

He was home.

Under the pall of night, a cloaked figure stared up at the twin crescents on the sky.

A spirit of Song drifted through the Fade's emerald paths, its coral light flickering as it crooned its flowing chorus:

In the heart of the Fade, seven mirrors ruled.

One for each sovereign that the Dread Wolf had fooled.

The seventh bled darkness and plague, its surface cracked and broken.

Now, it stood empty.

Its sleeping god had awoken.

Chapter End Notes

(chonky note ahead!)

Holy shit you guys. Two years and almost 600k words later, we've reached the end of itfoyl!!

But not the end of the series ;)

For those who'd like, they can choose to end the story here. I understand that works like this require a lot of stamina to read! So if you're content to end the story here, that's just as fine. Think of it like a train and this is one of the stops that you can get off at! Thank you for coming on this ride with me :D

For those who'd like to stay on the train, I'll see you in the next instalment! When? Good question LOL. I still have to plan and replay the Trespasser and Descent DLCs coz i've heckin forgotten what happens.

For now, I'm going to take a break for a few months. Sorry I can't really give a more concrete timeline aha. After that break, I'll post an extra chapter of sorts here about solas' time with clan lavellan, and i'll announce in the author's notes of that when to expect the next part :)

On that final note, THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading! Thank you for all the kudos and the comments and for recommending this to other people! Thank you to the people who created art and fics for this story! And most of all, thank you, dear readers, for reading and engaging with my silly lil mysteries. This was something that I wrote

on a whim based on a half-baked plan that I'd been turning in my head for months, and I didn't realise how BIG of an undertaking it was going to be. I had such a blast writing this! And I loved every moment of it, even though some parts stumped me and made me feel like I was chewing on metal lmao.

Most of all, I LOVED engaging with you guys in the comments/on tumblr/discord! When they say comments ensure content creators keep creating, they really do mean it. I couldn't have kept writing without the kind responses encouraging me and cheering me up during rough periods!

I hope this story was able to give you at least a quarter of the joy and comfort that writing it has given me. Stay safe, and I wish you all happiness and good health <3

Anyway, that's enough of me rambling! To those whose stop is here, thank you so much for hopping on this train! And to those staying on, see you in the next one ;) the last slice of bread has popped out of the toaster.

Translation

[1] **Mar enaste lan em lath'in'iseth:** Your grace warms my heart. [\[↑\]](#)

[2] **Ha'ma'lin:** Big brother. Doesn't have to be blood-related. Just used to refer to any male who's older than you, but not enough to be a hahren. [\[↑\]](#)

[3] **Mi'ghi'len:** Guiding Blade | Blade of the Guide. [\[↑\]](#)

Works inspired by this one: [Nothing Gold Can Stay](#) by [ClearAutumnVibes](#), [Starlight, star bright, will you bloom for me tonight?](#) by [ClearAutumnVibes](#), [Triumvirate](#) by [ClearAutumnVibes](#), [Something in my heart, some secret hidden part, illogically insists you are there, somewhere](#) by [Alasnirelan_Lavellan](#), [Wishes are Dreams, and Dreams are pretend](#) by [Alasnirelan_Lavellan](#), [Are You, Are You Coming To The Tree?](#) by [Alasnirelan_Lavellan](#), [I Dreamed a Dream](#) by [raven4138](#), [Forgotten But Never Gone](#) by [LunartheDragon](#), [Danem Elgar](#) by [HorribleWriterRain](#), [We go together \(Like rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong\)](#) by [Alasnirelan_Lavellan](#), [In a Kingdom by the Sea](#) by [ClearAutumnVibes](#)

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